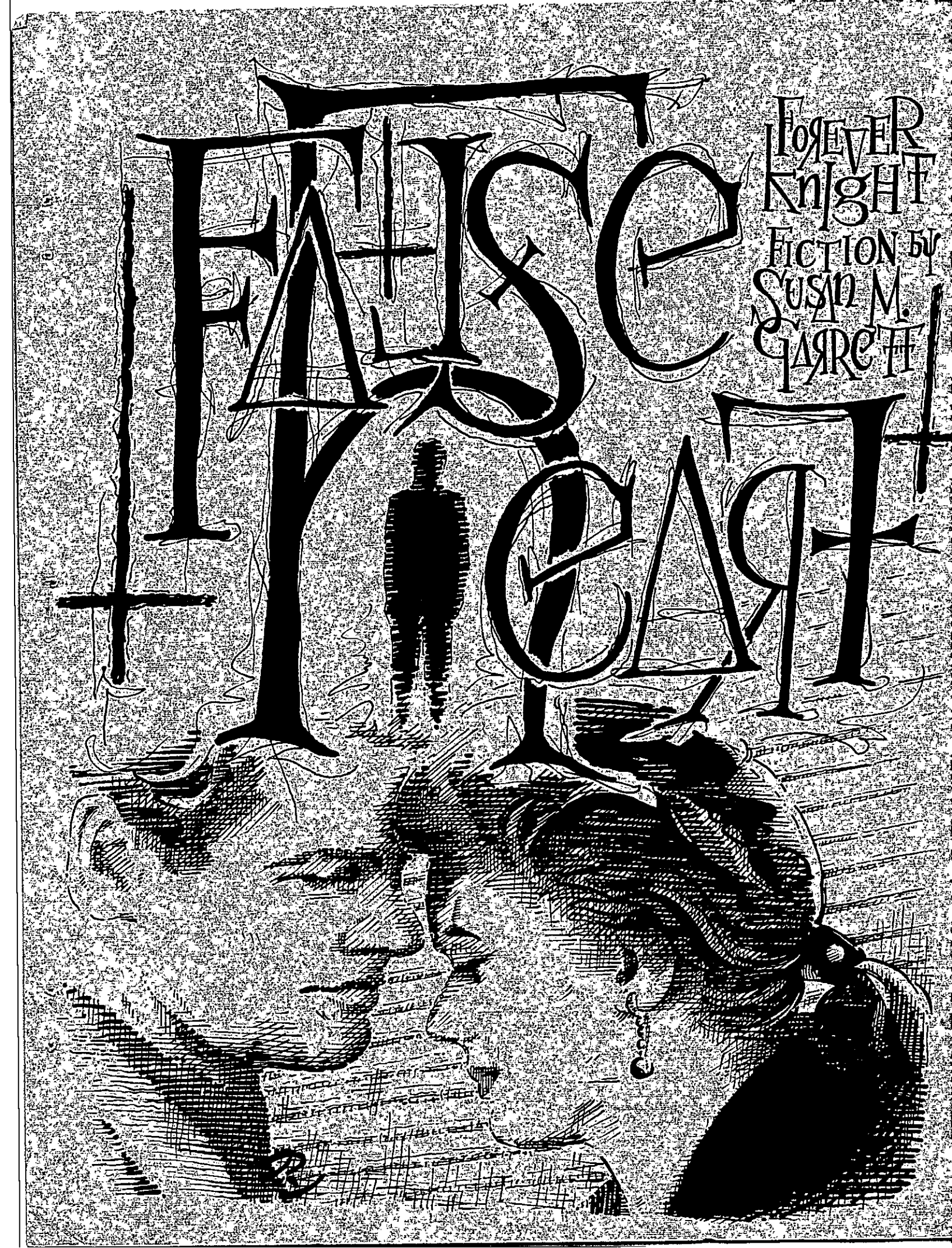
False Light

Forever Knight

Fiction by Susan M. Garrett



FALSE HEART

A *Forever Knight* Novel

Ye are of your father the devil . . . there is no truth in him . . . he is a liar and the father of it.
The Holy Bible: John - Acts 8:44

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E D I T O R I A L

I don't normally do this.

That is to say . . . I've never really written a novel before. Oh, yes, I've written great unwieldy things that can be used to prevent drafts, start a cheery fire, or cudgel unwelcome intruders senseless. But I've never really written *one* story that was quite this long.

It took me three weeks, after all. So I guess it's to be understood that if you work on the same story for three weeks it's apt to get a bit long in the tooth.

So, that's it, then. Three weeks equals one novel. No rocket science about that. Perfectly simple.

Well, not really. I should explain a few things. I had most of this novel completed by ***Dead of Winter I—Boston, March 1994*** (in fact, if you'd known to ask, I would have let you read it there). I left my beta-readers in rather a nasty spot in the story and went to the con in a state of agitation, wondering if I'd see cut pieces from the Canadian episodes that would contradict what I'd written or if Nigel Bennett (such a kind guest) would be coerced into revealing something about the new episodes that would send this little story spiraling down in flames. As it was, the information from that weekend filled in quite nicely with what I'd written.

I don't think I'll try that again. Too taxing.

For those of you who've read this on the net, you'll notice some new material and a few changes. For those of you who haven't, this story will hopefully serve as a bridge between the first and second seasons of *Forever Knight*. And I *will* take credit for any typos, errors, and screw-ups . . . I just won't take it right now.

I'm amazed at the reception this has received in its nascent forms, from my beta readers to the final posting on the Internet FKFIC list. In fact, I'm really quite astounded at how terribly nice everyone's been, from the poor people who have been flummoxed time and again by their e-mail readers and had pieces drop out of sequence or not at all, to the person who asked me for Dorian's home phone and address (which I'm not at liberty to divulge . . . but I *can* give you his fax number). So this is really in way of a thank you.

To my beta readers—Karin Welss, Marian Gibbons, Lisa McDavid, and Sandye Chisholm—none of whom spammed my e-mail box for leaving them on that dreadful cliffhanger while I went gallivanting off to the convention. To Jude Wilson for reading hard-copy, not laughing at the way I type, and preventing me from spending my life-savings at Borders Books. And Ann Larimer, for correcting me in all appropriate things, for writing sarcastic commentary in the margins, and for arting for my sake (she did the cover, you see).

I really should thank you, as well. And, hopefully, this will take the edge off the hunger until the new season starts . . . and then some.

Susan M. Garrett

CHAPTER ONE

The body was already bagged and on its way out the door as he arrived. Nick held up a hand, motioning to one of the Coroner's Office attendants. "Would you mind?"

The man shrugged his indifference. "He's not going anywhere."

A quick tug unzipped the black-lined silver bag. Nick didn't touch the body—his hands weren't gloved yet—but he committed the man's features to memory . . . as well as the large bloody gash that left the salt and pepper color of the man's right temple a muddy red. Zipping up the bag, he looked away quickly.

"And that, ladies and gentlemen, is the hallmark of a true professional—not tossing cookies on the corpse." Schanke was peeling protective white latex gloves from his hands as he walked over to Nick.

"Schanke, could you turn down the tie?" Nick held up a hand before his face, shading his eyes from the orange day-glow monstrosity Schanke wore over his suit jacket. It was decorated with a tall, thin, purple polka band.

In response, Schanke smoothed down the tie and adjusted his tie clip. "Hey, I'll have you know Jenny picked this out."

"Yeah. Well . . . it's nice." Nick lowered his hand, winced, then placed his hand before his eyes again. "But I'd have her eyes checked."

"Wait'll you check out this guy's closet, Mr. Armani. Bet even you'll go green with envy." Flipping back a few pages on his notebook, Schanke shook his head. "He's got shoes in there cost more than I make in a month."

Turning, he surveyed the room. Natalie was kneeling on the floor beside what appeared to be an 18th Century bureau, tweezers in hand and her attention at the corner of the piece. There were two other forensics staff members dusting and bagging around glass presentation cases and other antique furniture. "Let me guess," said Nick, still trying to absorb the breadth of the eclectic collection, "museum affiliation? Art collector?"

"The second. Alexander Kenko, Toronto native, Assistant Vice President of claims, Beneficial Insurance. You passed what was left on him on the way in. Looks like what was called in—straightforward 'burglary gone wrong.'" Schanke met his eyes. "What took you so long getting here?"

"You know that ATM repeater we've been looking for?"

"Yeah?" Schanke wore a hopeful grin.

"Some uniforms spotted him—the call came through while I was on the way over—"

"Yes!"

As the other police personnel in the room looked up, Nick turned a blank expression to the ceiling, the walls, the floor—although he flashed a smile at Natalie, who gave him a nod and went back to her tweezer work on the bureau.

Schanke tapped him on the shoulder. "And my ever-vigilant partner got him, right?"

"After a fifteen minute chase. The uniforms took him downtown; they should have him processed by the time we get there. Which reminds me—don't let me to forget to put in a claim for the Caddy's gas, okay?"

"I keep telling you, buy Japanese."

Shrugging his way out of the conversation, Nick walked over to Natalie and squatted down beside her. "I didn't know you were into woodworking."

"Hah-hah." Squinting, Natalie carefully wedged the tweezers into a crevice on the corner of the bureau, extracting a small matted clump of hair and dried blood. "Has anybody introduced you to the murder weapon yet?"

"This?" Nick slapped the back of his hand against the wood and Natalie winced.

"Careful, it's an antique."

"So am I." Smiling, Nick leaned close to her ear, whispering, "It's a fake."

She stared at him, stunned. Then remembering what she was about, picked up a plastic bag from the open kit beside her and carefully inserted the evidence. "You're kidding?"

Nick shrugged, then rose to his feet, his voice just low enough for her to hear. "I'll bet they're all fakes. From the Vermeer," he gestured toward a painting on the far wall as if stretching, then placed his hand on his hip, fingers pointing to the nearest glass display case. "Down to the ivories."

"You're sure?" Natalie accepted his hand up, then carefully sealed the evidence bag.

"At first glance—yeah."

"Wonder if his daughter knows?"

Nick met her gaze, then looked around quickly. "Daughter?"

"Yeah, she's the one who discovered the body. Had a dinner date with her dad. Found the door open and him—" Natalie looked down at the white tape that marked the area just beyond her feet. "Right there."

"Any time of death yet?"

"Ballpark figure—I'd say maybe three or four hours. But don't quote me on that till I get back to the lab. Speaking of which—" She punched him in the shoulder lightly, "It's needle day. I want to do another white cell count on you. See if cutting back on the stuff is having any effect."

"Why don't I just resign from the force and become a professional pincushion?"

"Why?" Biting her lip rakishly, Natalie met his gaze. "Don't tell me you're getting a phobia about needles?"

"I'm getting a phobia about the fact that you seem to enjoy it so much," he answered, with a mock frown. When she leaned down to pick up her bag, he asked, "So, you want me to stop by the lab after shift?"

Natalie paused, bag in hand, and pushed a lock of hair back from her face, expression thoughtful. "No—I'll drop by the loft on my way out. All I need is Grace asking questions about why I'm taking blood samples from you once a week."

"That'd make two of us."

Wrinkling her nose at him, she turned her back and started toward the door, but Schanke caught her arm on the way out. "Nat—could I have your professional opinion on this—?" When Nick looked over, Schanke waved him away. "Be with you in a second."

Nodding, Nick walked over to one of the glass cases and looked inside. The cards with the small ivory altarpieces identified them as 400 AD, but he knew better. They were fakes. And, if robbery *was* the motive . . . Alexander Kenko had died because somebody couldn't tell the difference.

"But it's *this* Saturday—"

Schanke's voice was low, but Nick could pick up the words easily enough. He pretended interest in another case containing more ivory—netsuke, small ivory animals or figures that were used as sash ends or were placed in the hilts of swords. These, too, were fake, although quality fakes, like the other pieces. Kenko hadn't gotten these at a local dimestore. Which begged the question—did Kenko know his collection was filled with fakes? Or had someone been selling him fakes, and forging the provenances and authentications as real antiques?

"Schanke—lay off, okay! He hasn't asked me. For all you know, Nick's got other plans—"

Nick's attention was attracted at the mention of his name, his train of thought suddenly derailed by Natalie's voice. Frowning, he continued to stare down at the glass, trying to connect Saturday with . . . the Solicitor General's Dinner-Dance! Tilting his head back, he closed his eyes and wondered for the hundredth time why his perfect memory always fell by the wayside when it came to night-to-night mortal details, particularly those dealing with Natalie. Not that Schanke hadn't been on his back about his asking somebody—particularly their favorite coroner—for the past two weeks. And it was *this* weekend?

"Don't tell me he's shy, Nat. Cause I've seen him around women and Nick is *not* the shy type—"

Wincing inwardly, Nick made a mental note to thank his partner *personally* for his intervention in this matter. If Schanke hadn't messed up the situation beyond repair, he'd ask Nat this morning, when she came by to get the blood sample. She'd probably decline. He'd no idea if she even *liked* dancing. And the Solicitor General's black-tie get-togethers—all in the name of charity, of course—were supposed to be deadly dull affairs, with speech after speech . . . .

The cellular phone in his jacket pocket beeped. Grateful for the distraction, Nick reached into his coat and unfolded the phone with a snap of his wrist, then extended the antenna. "Knight here."

"Nicola?"

"Janette, I've asked you not to call on this number," he said, unable to keep his voice from that inevitable mixture of frustration and exasperation that her calls produced.

And he hadn't kept his voice down, because Schanke was saying—"You hear that? It's Janette, from that club downtown. What is it with those two? Every time he drops by there, they spend two minutes talking and ten minutes chewing on each other. Then again, if I had an informant with that body—"

Nick closed his eyes tightly and wondered what non-fatal remedy he hadn't tried on Schanke that might get the man to keep his mouth shut. Natalie's answer was lost to him, as Janette spoke.

"I know, but it's an emergency. *He's* here."

There was a note of contained panic in her voice that he hadn't heard for at least a century. "Who?"

"The Archivist. Dorian." As Nick released a breath he didn't know he'd been holding, her panicked voice continued, "And he's looking for *you*, Nicola."

But the rest of the sentence hadn't registered, for the one word alone—Dorian—was enough to send his head spinning.

His long, blonde hair was soaked with water, slapping against his skin as he turned his head to look behind. There was no pursuit to be seen.

But, still, LaCroix hurried ahead, his cloak drawn around Janette in a protective manner as they thrashed their way through the forest underbrush. They'd left the trail some time before, heading down the bank of a small trickle that wasn't worthy of the word 'stream.' But when the rain had continued and the trickle had swollen to a respectable depth, they'd gone back up the bank and into the uncut forest. And with each step, LaCroix had seemed uncharacteristically careful with Janette, his eyes on her as often as the way ahead.

Janette shrieked aloud, stopping as a thin, green branch smacked against her pale skin, leaving a welt. Instantly, she grabbed hold of it, tearing it from the tree—but showering them all with more water in the process. LaCroix raised the back of his hand, as if to strike her, but stopped himself, grabbing hold of the back of her neck instead and looking over his shoulder, at Nicholas. "I think I see light up ahead."

"I need to rest," wailed Janette, her hand raised to the welt on her cheek. Escaping LaCroix's grip and leaning her back against the tree she'd struck earlier, she looked from him to LaCroix. "I can't run any more."

"What are we running *from*?" pressed Nicholas for the hundredth time, glaring at LaCroix. "Let's stand and fight."

But LaCroix's eyes were cold and hard and . . . was there an edge of fear within? Nicholas started back a step, surprised. Not seeming to notice, LaCroix reached for Janette's hand, pulling her to him. "We'll need to feed if we're going to keep up this pace," he said, over the steady sound of the rain. "There should be something of worth in that hovel. Take care when we enter and leave them alive, Nicholas—for the moment."

He knew enough not to question. Nodding, Nicholas followed, still casting glances over his shoulder. Only once did he pause, when he thought he saw a gleam of gold among the leaves. It could have been nothing more than a reflection from a leaf, or a brightly colored bird.

But birds had fled these northern climes a half season before. And there was no moon to give light, it was hidden by the clouds that gifted them with this chilling, steady rain.

LaCroix's eyes, as usual, had been sharp and accurate—there was a cottage ahead built of wattle and daub. The thatched roof had seen better nights, but it appeared fairly sound. And an oiled skin that hung over a gap in the wall flickered with the glow from an inner fire. Counting the door—made of nothing stronger than sticks bundled with twine—as no real obstacle, he nodded to LaCroix as they exited the cover of the trees and underbrush and started across the muddy clearing.

Janette hung back, covering herself with the hood and leaves of her cloak. They'd come upon one cottage in the past where a pious monk had holy water, which he'd sprinkled on them in welcome. His throat had been torn out by LaCroix's angry teeth before the burning drops had dried. Nicholas flashed her a confident smile—he'd protect her at all cost. But still, she remained behind them, taking her proper place among the three.

LaCroix stood to one side of the door and Nicholas on the other. When he reached for the sword at his belt, LaCroix shook his head and made a motion with his hands, indicating that the gleam on the metal from the fire would take away their immediate surprise. Not that they expected much resistance, but they'd been running for three nights, with only one feeding since first flight and that a paltry shepherd and his son. Whetting his lips with the rain, Nicholas hungered for the iron taste of the blood.

At LaCroix's signal, he put his shoulder to the door, breaking it from its moorings, and stumbled a step or two into the room. A hand closed around his throat, pulling

him backward, even as LaCroix came through the door. Nicholas shoved his elbow back, hard, against his captor's midsection, expecting to hear the crack of ribs beneath solid bone. Instead, he felt a shudder go through him as his elbow connected with what felt like the best of walls a clever mason could build.

Another shriek from Janette caused him to look back to the doorway. Eyes golden, she struggled in the grip of a vampire whose skin was paler than the finest bleached parchment. Nicholas had only a second to register eyes that glowed green, the color of tarnished gold, before he was forced to his knees, arm pulled almost from its socket as it was wrenched roughly behind him. His hair was grabbed by another hand and pulled back, so that he looked into the white face of death, lips red and fangs pearl. Then he saw a sharpened stake held above him, ready to be plunged into his chest.

"No!" cried LaCroix's voice, as Nicholas' gaze fixed on the destruction that hovered above him. "Dorian—leave him. Please."

Another surprise—LaCroix's words were breathless, his tone that of surrender. The captor behind Nicholas released the hold on his wet hair. Nicholas looked over at LaCroix, stunned, then followed his master's gaze, to the fire.

The figure seated on the rickety chair was dressed better than the other vampires in his entourage. His hands were gloved, the leather fine, and his cloak and cotebardie were brightly colored, as were his matching hose. The girdle he wore around his waist was of gold, inset with fine stones. He held no weapon.

But Nicholas had learned, long before he came across, that the cut and quality of a nobleman's clothes were often his best weapon. This man, this . . . Dorian, as LaCroix had called him, had eyes dark as coal and hair to match. Lit only by the glow of the fire, he emerged from the shadows as a brightly colored image. But once the fire had faded, he would sink back into the dark cloak, being nothing more than a memory of pale skin and red-black eyes. For this was indeed, no man. This was a vampire.

And LaCroix, who feared not even the sun as much as he should, surrendered to Dorian.

"Nicola?"

The panic in Janette's voice startled him awake. "Yes, yes, I'm here," he answered softly, very glad that his mortal friends didn't have his sensitive hearing.

"Well, you shouldn't be. He knows where you live, Nicola—he flaunted it before me—so don't go to the loft. Or here. His spies will be watching. I can have someone meet you with some money, you carry so little these days. There must be somewhere you can go, somewhere you can't be traced—"

"I'm not running."

"Fool!" He smiled to himself, having heard that tone in her voice before and very glad he wasn't there in person, to feel her fingers smack against his face. "This is no time for brave posturing—it's *Dorian*."

"So?"

"So? It's the interview, you idiot."

Taking a breath, Nick glanced down into the case of ivories—a pudgy god of luck smiled back. Unfortunately, he was a fake. "You'd have me run. Dorian would declare *aqua et igni interdictus*. I'd become an outlaw, Janette. And you'd be in danger, if only for warning me. No . . . I'll stand for the interview. I've got nothing to hide."

He turned as he spoke and caught sight of Natalie still arguing with Schanke. She blushed as their eyes met, slapped Schanke on the shoulder, then headed out the door without a backward glance.

"You've got a *lot* to hide," corrected Janette, as his own eyes confirmed her opinion. "Nicola, *please*? For my sake?"

Nick couldn't help but smile at the tone. Janette demanded more often than asked. "I'll see you tomorrow night, Janette."

For a moment, he thought the line had gone dead, then he heard her sigh. "I will miss you, Nicola. Truly."

There was no mistaking the slam of the receiver into the cradle. Knowing how that softness in her tone often presaged such events, he was quick enough at holding the phone away from his ear. But the sound still echoed. It seemed so . . . final.

"Finished with the personal phone calls, are we?" asked Schanke, adjusting his tie proudly. He tapped his knuckle against the notebook in his hand. "You want to interview the daughter?"

"What?" Startled, Nick stared at him, the word 'interview' giving him pause. Then he shook his head. "No, not if you've spoken to her. I assume we're ruling her out as a suspect?"

"Considering I was ready to call the paramedics when I showed—I thought she was heading for a breakdown. But there was a family friend in the building, they're both in the kitchen." Glancing down at the notebook, Schanke sighed. "Gloria Kenko. Hydro-electric engineer." Schanke smirked. "Can you believe that—'hydro-electric engineer'? Used to be 'power plant employee' till the unions took over."

"Also used to be sixty hour weeks with no overtime," reminded Nick. He gestured around the room, at the various pieces of furniture and cases. "Could she tell if anything was missing?"

"Not a clue. She seems to think it was a robbery. Says her dad was real bad about locking up." Schanke pursed his lips. "Then again, the mother died some years ago, no other kids or relatives, so she *might* be sole beneficiary . . . ."

"But you don't think so?"

Schanke shook his head. "Doesn't feel right."

"Then we'll go with it as a robbery."

Holding his hand over his heart, Schanke took a

step backward. "Do my ears deceive me? Is my partner trusting *my* instincts for a change?"

Managing a wan smile, Nick slapped Schanke on the back as he passed, heading for the door. "You're the primary, right? I'm just here for backup. Besides, we've gotta find out where Kenko got this stuff. And most of the antiques agents and dealers work day shift . . . ?"

Schanke was hot on his heels, pausing only long enough to tell a uniformed officer, "Tell Miss Kenko she can go, will you?" He followed Nick from display case to display case. "How come we never get cases where *you* can do the leg work, huh?"

"We *did*. Tonight. I chased that ATM suspect for five blocks."

"Uh, yeah." Smirking, Schanke took a step back. "And never lost the crease on your slacks. If I didn't know better, I'd say you were allergic to exercise."

Nick planted his fist lightly in Schanke's midsection. "This from Donut Don?"

Before Schanke could answer, the uniformed officer returned, accompanying a woman who appeared to be in her mid-twenties, and another, older woman. Almost instantly, he concurred with Schanke's conclusion—this wasn't a family squabble gone bad. He'd seen the many forms guilt took, over the centuries, and this woman didn't show a sign of it.

Schanke stepped forward. "Miss Kenko? This is my partner, Detective Knight."

Nick shook the woman's hand. Her eyes were glazed—he knew immediately that she wouldn't know who he was later. "We'll be in touch. If you'll be able to help us by answering a few questions?"

The woman stared at him blankly, then nodded. The older woman smiled at him, extending her own hand. "Mrs. Cornell," she said. "Rita Cornell. I used to work for Mr. Kenko, before I retired."

Schanke cleared his throat. "Would it be possible for you to come down to the station tomorrow—?"

Mrs. Cornell gave him a curt nod, then looked at Nick. "I don't suppose there's much I could tell you. But I think Gloria needs to be looked after. And the arrangements."

"Of course," answered Nick. Gesturing toward another of the uniformed officers, he said, "Davies—you want to escort these ladies home?"

"That won't be necessary," began Mrs. Cornell. Then, after glancing at Gloria Kenko, who seemed frozen in place, she nodded. "Yes. Maybe that would be best."

Nick turned to watch them go. Instinct and experience told him that they had nothing to do with the crime. Which meant they were back to the robbery theory . . . and hours of paperwork loomed ahead, as they tried to figure out what, if anything, had been stolen.

"Earth to Nick?"

"What?" He started, looking at Schanke. "Sorry. Just thinking."

"Well, that's a change." Schanke gestured over his shoulder, toward the door by which Gloria and Mrs. Cornell had left. "So's that. You *not* escorting home a pretty, young, bereaved family member? That's just not SOP."

"Lay off, Schanke. Okay?" Nick took one last look at the apartment. "I guess we're done for now, right? Let's just seal the place off until we can get some documentation on this stuff. Maybe Natalie will come up with something."

"Speaking of Natalie—" began Schanke, following him out of the apartment.

CHAPTER TWO

WEARILY, Natalie wandered into the reception area of the Coroner's Office just as she hit on the fifty-third thing she could do to make Schanke's life a temporary living hell that a) couldn't be traced back to her, or b) be considered illegal. Immoral and fattening were covered by items seventeen and thirty-four, respectively.

Oh, sure, he meant well. But to quiz her about the Solicitor General's Dinner-Dance in Nick's hearing wasn't the smoothest of moves.

Then again, Schanke didn't know Nick's hearing was keener than that of an ordinary mortal. Which meant that she couldn't, in good conscience, blame him for turning a relatively comfortable situation into one which flirted with potentially disastrous embarrassment. Then again, filling out a few of those stupid subscription cards—the ones that always fell out of the magazines she flipped through in the bookstore—with Schanke's name and address would be worth a few chuckles. And, if the guilt got to her, she could always apologize.

Maybe.

She was smiling when Grace came through the lab door, wearing her work greens, and Grace smiled back, pointing at her. "He asked, didn't he?"

Natalie stared at her friend, an uneasy feeling beginning to form in the pit of her stomach. "Who asked what?"

"Oh. Nothing." Clearing her throat, Grace gestured toward the lab. "We've gotten a delivery from downtown—looks like an overdose. They'd like you to put a priority on it. And I just got a call that our latest client's arrived downstairs. They'll be sending him up shortly."

"Okay. Thanks." She headed toward the lab door as Grace moved behind the desk and started shuffling papers. In fact, she'd gotten halfway through the swinging door when she realized that Grace hadn't answered her question.

Spinning on her heel, Natalie came back through the door and leaned her palms on Grace's desk. "Who asked *what?*" she repeated.

For a moment, she suspected that Grace was going to give her a story. But her no-nonsense gaze must have turned the tide. Smiling sheepishly, her friend and coworker looked down at the papers on the desk and muttered, "Well, I kinda thought Nick might happen to mention something about a certain police social event coming up this weekend . . . ?"

"The Solicitor General's Dinner-Dance?" supplied Natalie, with feigned innocence.

"So, he did ask?" pressed Grace, looking up suddenly, a gleam in her eye.

Natalie shook her head and, turning, walked back into the lab without answering.

Grace followed on her heels. "Don't hold out on me, girl. I want details."

"We were at a crime scene." She gave the body bag on the trolley only a casual glance as she passed it, on the way to her desk. Natalie hung up her purse, then turned to Grace. "Which isn't usually considered a social gathering. Between you and Schanke, you're both going to drive me—"

"So, Schanke's in on it, too, huh?" asked Grace. When Natalie gave her a sharp look, she backed away, hands raised in surrender. "If being interested in the very inactive social life of one of my nicest friends is a crime, tell 'em to slap on the cuffs and put me away for life."

Natalie touched her fingertips to her forehead in despair—she couldn't be angry at Grace for long. "All right. I'm sorry. No, Nick didn't ask me to the dance." Turning, she took her greens from a hook on the wall. "And he's not going to ask me to the dance."

"He's bought tickets."

She glanced at Grace over her shoulder, as she slipped her arms into the sleeves. "How do you know?"

"I checked." Grace shrugged. "So sue me."

Looking back at the wall, Natalie stilled the faint hope that rose within her with a cold realization. "Nick always buys tickets. To everything. He just likes to support worthwhile causes. He never goes."

"Doesn't mean he can't change his mind." Moving to stand behind her, Grace tied the back of her protective gown. "It's a man's prerogative, right?"

Waving her away and reaching behind to fasten the ties on her own gown, Natalie eyed Grace suspiciously. "Don't tell me there's a betting pool on this?" And when Grace gave her a lop-sided smile, Natalie groaned and sank back against the edge of the sink. "Oh, God, no! You're kidding, right?"

"It's been kind of an on-going thing," admitted Grace, after a moment's guilty pause. "We just keep rolling over the funds. And there's quite a nice sum in there right now, just about enough to replace that washing machine that I've been griping about. So if you could see your way clear—"

"Out!" Natalie pointed toward the door, her tone stern.

Grace backed up a few steps. "It all depends on the first official date—the Dinner-Dance would be as good as anything. Or just dinner. Or something like that."

"Out!" repeated Natalie. Stalking toward Grace, she picked up the clipboard that rested on the trolley with the body bag, raising it as if it were a weapon. "Or so help me—"

"All right. I'll just see if the head trauma's come up, yet."

Lowering the clipboard, Natalie gave her a faint smile. "Yeah. Why don't you do that."

Grace paused at the door, eyeing Natalie hesitantly. "You don't hate me?"

"We'll split the pot fifty-fifty?"

"Sixty-forty, your favor."

"I don't hate you," promised Natalie. "Although if you're not out of here in ten seconds, I'll be very annoyed."

"Check." Grace pushed on the doors and headed out of the lab, calling, "You're not getting any younger."

Gritting her teeth, Natalie resisted the urge to smack herself on the forehead with the clipboard. Instead, she placed it on the edge of the desk and headed back to the sink, where a fresh cap and set of gloves awaited her. It was wonderful, the way everyone in the Coroner's Office took an interest in her love-life . . . or lack thereof. She almost pitied Nick—it was probably worse for him over at the precinct where an officer who wasn't married and/or engaged was expected to hit on anything in a skirt.

She looked back at the lab door, through which Grace had disappeared. If she was getting the intensive treatment from Grace, who was usually less than subtle, what must Nick be getting from Schanke? The fact that Schanke had tried to pin her down about her availability that night meant there was probably some plan brewing in his souvlaki-loving little brain.

Maybe the best thing to do would be to let Nick off the hook when she dropped by tonight . . . casually mention that she was pulling an extra shift, that she was going to catch up on some paperwork, or that she was planning to wash her hair.

Wincing at the last idea, Natalie struck that option from the list and turned on the water in the sink. She wasn't concentrating. There had to be a hundred very logical excuses she could give Nick for why she wouldn't be available Saturday night, that wouldn't insult his intelligence or wound his pride.

And that's what they'd be—excuses. Because she would very much have liked him to ask her to that Dinner-Dance. All things being equal.

That is . . . if he were as mortal as she.

Shutting off the tap, Natalie shook her hands over the sink. But that wasn't the case. Nick was a vampire, although it was hard to think of him as anything other than human. And, lately, he seemed to have been backsliding an awful lot. Oh, they'd made good progress for the first year or so, but ever since that museum guard's murder and the death of Alyce, he'd reverted to his old ways more often. It was about that time that he'd re-

established his contact with Janette and the crowd at the Raven.

She froze, hand reaching for a towel, remembering arguing with Schanke at the Kenko crime scene. Nick had behaved himself, pretending to look over the contents of the display cases—although she'd seen that smirk on his face, which meant that he'd heard every word. Then his cellular phone had buzzed . . . it had been Janette.

Even Schanke had heard that much. He'd seen them together. And both his tone and his very carefully chosen words indicated that he thought he knew very well what the relationship was between Nick and Janette. As if he'd ever know.

As if *she'd* ever know . . . .

Natalie took a breath, half-concentrating on getting the water from her hands. She'd stonewalled Schanke, waiting for Nick to get off the phone so she could talk to him. As she kept half on eye on him, she realized that something Janette said upset him . . . no, *unnerved* him. Nick always got that certain look when something got under his skin, like he was ready to bolt but didn't know where he was going or why.

It took her long enough to understand that he wasn't getting off the phone right away and that Schanke wasn't about to let up—she'd been the one to bolt, fleeing the crime scene as if she were the prime suspect. She had a job to return to, after all. There were bodies waiting.

There were *always* bodies waiting.

Sighing, Natalie tossed the paper towel in the trash and picked up the gloves. Working her hands into the latex, she tried to come up with something she could tell Nick when she dropped by the loft, something that wouldn't sound like an excuse. Maybe going to the dance would be the best thing for him, make him reaffirm his commitment to mortality. Because if he kept hanging around the other vampires—she refused to think of them as others of his kind—he'd keep slipping back into that other world.

And she was beginning to fear that he might very well drag her with him, every step of the way.

CHAPTER THREE

Thankfully, the talk about the Solicitor General's Dinner-Dance was cut off when Schanke had to take his own car to the station. Nick settled into the silence of the Caddy gratefully. For a moment, he hesitated, his hand reaching for the phone in his jacket. He'd missed most of what Schanke had said to Natalie, but what little he'd caught made him uneasy about leaving the invitation until this morning. Natalie didn't need that kind of pressure. If he called her now, invited her as a casual gesture, it would give her a chance to turn him down gracefully.

But when his hand touched the phone, Nick froze, the conversation with Janette coming to mind. Putting off the question of the Dinner-Dance, he started the engine and headed back to the station, knowing that Dorian wasn't a problem that could be solved with a phone call.

When Dorian rose from the seat by the fire, the cloak rose with him, a dark shadow that joined the one the fire cast. It made him appear taller than anyone in the room, although Nick would have judged the man no taller than himself and no older. But the apparent age of vampires was more than deceptive.

He struggled against the vampire's grip around his throat and the other that held his hands—it took two of them to hold him. But when Dorian stood over him and fixed him with those dark eyes, he froze. "*Please*, LaCroix?" asked Dorian. "Are you up to your old tricks, again?" Reaching forward, he placed a hand to the side of Nicholas' face, the fine, soft glove wiping away some of the rain that still clung to him—cold water on cold skin. "He doesn't seem much of a prize. And you owe me forfeit for running."

Nicholas was just as glad that dark gaze left him and turned to LaCroix. But the fear was gone from LaCroix's eyes. He met Dorian's eyes, a smile twisting his lips. "Would you rather I not run?"

Dorian's smile matched LaCroix's, line for line, edge for edge.

"True. You make the game more interesting. All right, I concede the forfeit. Let the brute live . . . for now."

The arm fell from his neck at Dorian's words, but a vampire's grip still pinned Nicholas' hands behind his back. He was lifted to his feet, none too gently, in time to see Dorian approach the pale vampire who held Janette. Muscles tensed as he prepared to break the grip that held him and spring at Dorian, but a sharp look from LaCroix stopped him.

Dorian lifted Janette's chin with the edge of his finger. "Still pretty, isn't she? Remarkable, LaCroix. I'd say your taste has improved, but for this other one."

Nicholas waited for LaCroix to make his move, to take a course of action that he could understand and follow . . . but LaCroix did nothing. Even as Dorian nodded to the vampire that held Janette and whispered, "Take her. I'll be ready for her in an hour." When he turned back to the fire, the vampire backed out the empty doorway, Janette still clutched in his grip. She started to shriek, screaming at him in French, then in at least two languages that Nicholas didn't understand.

Again, he met LaCroix's eyes, waiting for a signal.

But the signal didn't come.

Dorian seated himself by the fire, the dark gaze looking at the flames. "Why don't you sit down? There's no reason we can't be civilized about this. And you look soaked to the bone."

The vampire behind him released the grip on his arms. Nicholas rubbed his forearms with his hands, then paused, wary. One of the vampires moved to the door of the cottage, blocking the exit, although Nicholas knew that the barest blow from his own fist could have weakened the wattle and daub structure easily, bringing it down atop their heads.

"Sit down, Nicholas," instructed LaCroix. He'd walked to the fire, standing beside Dorian.

He looked to the doorway again, but before he could ask, LaCroix added, "She'll come back to us. Now sit down, this chivalry nonsense is becoming tiresome."

Eyeing the three pale vampires in turn, Nicholas sat away from the fire, his back against the weak wall of the cottage.

"At least it takes direction well," said Dorian. When LaCroix only glared at him, he smiled. "And I'm being a poor host. I have something for you, LaCroix." Reaching to one side, he dragged forward a rough cloth sack, less than the size of a man. Dorian twisted the rope at the mouth, then freed it and pulled back the cloth.

There was a woman inside—little more than a girl, actually, not yet of marriageable age, but old enough. Her eyes were wide and blank and a cloth had been tied around her mouth and hands. She seemed oblivious to their presence or her own predicament, her shift askew and her hair dirtied.

LaCroix turned, hands clasped behind his back. "She looks anything but appetizing."

"There were others," he admitted. "We were at least an hour ahead of you—I had to have something to occupy my time. Be thankful that I thought to leave one. And the best. She's virgin . . . not like that *togata* you tried to keep from me."

"Take care what you call Janette," warned LaCroix, still staring down at the girl, but a smile stole across his lips.

"What? In her hearing? Or his?" He nodded toward Nicholas. "You bait the hook well, but I can't say much of the catch."

"He's less than a century across. Let him be." Leaning down, LaCroix placed his hand beneath the girl's shoulder and lifted her to her feet. Seemingly without will, she remained limp in his grasp. "Will you release her?"

Dorian sighed. "She'll only scream."

"So much the better."

Shaking his head, Dorian rose. His eyes locked with the girl's, then her eyes grew wider as he whispered something. LaCroix laughed. The girl's mouth opened and Dorian put his hands over his ears, turning away. But before sound could escape, LaCroix spun the girl like a spindle, so that she faced him, and sank his teeth into her throat.

When there was no sound but the slurp of blood, Dorian turned back to watch LaCroix feed. He raised an eyebrow, and shook his head, a slight smile gracing his lips. Then he walked over and squatted down before Nicholas. "So, Nicholas, that's what LaCroix called you, yes?"

"That's my name," he spat.

Dorian wiped his gloved hands together. "Oh good. It speaks." Then those dark eyes were raised to his again. "LaCroix knows the ways of these things, so he must have taught you about the Code. And the Enforcers." Gesturing with his thumb, Dorian pointed out the pale vampires, who stood guard. "But I can also safely assume that he never mentioned me. My name is Dorian. I'm the Archivist."

Nicholas couldn't meet those red-black eyes—they burned too hot and bright. Instead, he looked over Dorian's shoulder, where LaCroix was feeding. The shift had fallen from the girl's still form and a thin bead of blood ran down her bare back, across her mottled skin. "You work for the Enforcers."

"*With* them," corrected Dorian, his tone containing annoyance. "I record the histories of vampires—that's part of the Code as well. They have to tell me the truth, because I know false words and false hearts. I'm here to interview your Janette. She'll be returned to you, when I'm through with her. What happens then is your own affair." Rising to his feet, he stared down at Nicholas. "Remember me. One day I'll come for you."

The black cloak swirling around the colors of his cotebardie, Dorian turned and stalked out of the cottage, into the darkness of the night and the steady hiss of the rain. One of the Enforcers—for that was what they were—

accompanied him, while the other two stayed behind.

Nicholas dropped his hand to the hilt of his sword thoughtfully. With LaCroix just feeding now, surely they two could easily overtake these others and rescue Janette?

There was a thud as LaCroix allowed the girl's body to fall to the dirt. Blood dribbled down his chin. He touched his finger to it and licked it. "No, Nicholas," he warned, returning to the fire. "We'll stay here, until Dorian tells us otherwise."

Nicholas struggled to his feet, then moved to stand beside LaCroix, stepping over the corpse to reach him. "But Janette—?"

"Will survive. She always has, long before you ever joined us." Gesturing toward the seat Dorian had left, LaCroix said, "Sit down. Rest. I know you've a pair of dice. And coins enough to gamble." Looking over his shoulder, to the open doorway, LaCroix's smile disappeared. "But never gamble with Dorian. Do as he says, and you may yet live to see your first century." Then LaCroix glanced down at the corpse with disdain. "Ah, but the field is blocked. Do me a service, Nicholas, and get rid of this. In return, I'll give you first throw."

There was no thought involved—there never had been before. He grabbed the corpse by the hair and dragged it to the door. Neither of the Enforcers made a move to stop him as he leaned forward, broke the neck, then tossed the mortal remains out into the mud . . . .

Laughter rang from the squad room as he entered the station. Nick paused at the Public Desk for a moment, catching sight of one of the uniformed officers to whom he'd turned over his ATM suspect earlier. "He through booking yet?"

The officer nodded, gesturing over his shoulder toward booking and holding. "Paperwork's on your desk, Nick. He's got a call in to his lawyer, but he knows we got some nice shots of him from the last ATM camera. Five'll get you ten he pleads guilty on a lesser charge."

"Which'll still put him away for two years." Sighing, Nick nodded at the news—two years wasn't half the sentence the ATM stick-up artist deserved, but it would have to do. Modern justice wasn't swift, but as long as he was part of the system, he'd have to take what he could get. "Thanks for bringing him in for me."

"Any time. But you got the collar," said the officer. He shook his head in disbelief. "How you got to that guy so fast—you on the track team in high school or something?"

"I used to run a lot." Another burst of laughter from the squad room caught his attention. Flashing a quick smile at the officer, he said, "See ya, later. And thanks again," then started toward the office door. But a glance through the sliding glass window froze his blood and he quickly moved to one side of the door, where he couldn't be seen.

The man sitting in his chair, at his desk, was Dorian. Even after so many centuries, there was no mistake. The hair was still as dark—jet black and shiny—but the long curls had been cropped. He was talking to Schanke, who was parked on the edge of his desk, beside a blonde woman whom Nick didn't immediately recognize, but whose face seemed familiar.

"He should be here any second," said Schanke's voice. "I don't know what's—"

"He's here. Now."

Dorian's tone of voice hadn't changed. Nor had his tendency to maintain control over every situation. Nick stepped out from beside the door and leaned against the doorjamb, casually. "Hi. Long time no see."

Rising from the chair, Dorian gave him an appraising look, then a nod. He offered his hand. "Nicholas—*Nick*. You're right, it's been a while. Seems like centuries." He half-turned. "Your partner was just filling us in on the progress of your career. *Detective?* Very impressive."

"I've earned it," answered Nick, his tone carefully neutral. Dorian stepped aside as he moved toward his chair. The blonde met his gaze with an even stare as he sat down. "If you don't mind, I've got work to do—" Reaching forward, he pulled a file folder out from beneath her. She hastily slipped off his desk and out of the way, glancing quickly at Dorian. Both she and Dorian were dressed casually, wearing denim jeans and cotton shirts.

"C'mon, Nick, work can wait." Schanke moved around to his own desk. "How often do your relatives stop by?"

"Relati—"

"Distant relative, Detective Schanke—uh, Don," Dorian corrected. He smiled at Nick. "There's blood between us. It's thin, but it's there."

"I know exactly what you mean," said Schanke, dropping into the chair behind his desk. "Myra—that's my wife—got into this genealogy thing once. If you knew how many people had Schanke blood in their veins—"

Nick cleared his throat, loudly. "I, for one, would be terrified." He looked at the blonde woman and frowned. "*We're* not related. But I've seen you somewhere . . . ?"

"Ah-hah!" cried Schanke, clapping his hand down on his desk. "Got you! I knew it."

"What?" Bewildered, Nick turned to his partner.

Schanke leaned across his desk. "You *do* watch the soaps during the day!" When Nick continued to stare, he pointed toward the blonde. "Or how would you recognize Vivian Messer? You know—Tia Revenge on 'Stormy Paradise'?"

"That was five years ago," said Vivian. But as Nick looked back at her, she smiled warmly. "Five very *long* years. I'm afraid I just don't fit the role of an ingenue any more. Pleased to make your acquaintance, Detective Knight. If I still carried photos, I'd give you an autograph."

Nick stared at Dorian, not bothering to hide his surprise that the Archivist of the Vampires would be accompanied by an ex-soap opera star, but Dorian's face was a mask, giving nothing away. "Thanks, but—whatever

Schanke says. I'm not really a fan. I may have seen it flipping channels—"

"Myra would *kill* to have your autograph." Schanke was rummaging hurriedly through the drawers of his desk. "Hang on, I know I've got an old *Soap Opera Digest* somewhere."

While Schanke rummaged, Nick glanced back and forth, from Dorian—the Archivist of Vampires—to Vivian, ex-soap star who was definitely *not* an Enforcer. She wasn't even a *vampire*. Finally, the corners of Dorian's lips curled upward. "All right, Nick . . . she's my secretary. And my traveling companion." He reached out and placed his arm around Vivian's shoulders, drawing her closer to his side. "You know how lonely our lives can be. Think of my vocation—I don't have the leisure to put down roots as often or for as long as the rest of you. Besides, it's only recently we've been able to access funds and travel arrangements after sunset."

"Oh, thanks," said Vivian lightly, slapping his shoulder. "Make me sound like the latest in a long line, why don'tcha?" But when she looked at Nick, there was something about the way her lips trembled that belied the ease in her words.

"Got it!" Schanke threw a dogeared copy of the magazine down on his blotter, then picked up a pen. For the first time, he seemed hesitant, as he looked up at Vivian. "You wouldn't mind?"

"Not at all. My acting days may be behind me, but it's nice to know someone remembers me for what I was." Walking past Dorian, she leaned over Schanke's desk. "What was your wife's name—Myra?"

"Just make it out to Don."

In response to Schanke's glance—which dared him to say *anything*—Nick shrugged, biting back a smile. "Not a word."

"Yeah, like you have a right. I *knew* you were a closet soapie! And if it wasn't for that skin condition, you'd be watching 'em on tape, like the rest of us."

"Skin condition?" Dorian's thin smile grew broader and he winked at Nick. "Other times, other customs, eh?" Then, as Vivian finished the autograph, handing it to a beaming Schanke, Dorian reached out his hand and caught hers, pulling her close again. "So, Nick—we'll only be in town for a few days. I thought we might visit for a while. At your convenience, of course. I wouldn't want to interrupt your . . . work schedule?"

"At least your timing's good," said Schanke. "Nick's got some time coming, after tomorrow night. Two days off."

"Perfect," purred Dorian. Then, he glanced around the squad room. "I don't suppose you could slip out with us now, Nick, could you? I was by your place earlier, but since you weren't home, I came here. I'm dying to get a look at it."

Once again, before Nick could answer, Schanke chimed in, "Sure he could. The Captain's off for the night. And after taking out that ATM suspect, he'll ruin the department case curve if he solves anything else tonight." He ignored Nick's furious gaze. "I'll cover for you. The Kenko case seems pretty cut-and-dried. It's mostly paperwork, now. And I just know how you *love* paperwork. A real man of action, we got here," he explained, directing his comments to Dorian.

Dorian's eyes grew hard, as he met Nick's gaze. "Yes. I remember." Then he turned and offered his hand to Schanke. "Thank you Detect—Don. You've been most helpful. I'm more convinced than ever that the fates are smiling at Nick, having given him a partner like you."

"We're the best," said Schanke proudly. His grin bordered on a leer as he leaned forward to shake Vivian's hand. "Hey, thanks for the autograph. Maybe if you're in town longer next time, you could stop by and meet Myra. She'd really get a kick out of it."

"I'm sure I would, too." Vivian smiled prettily, then was encircled by Dorian's arm, as he led her to the door.

"We'll wait for you in the lot, Nick," called Dorian, over his shoulder.

"Yeah. Let me just wrap up a few things first."

"Nice people," commented Schanke, leaning back in his chair. "Wonder how a guy like that hooked up with such a babe? Five years ago, she was *something*. More steam than soap. But, hey, I don't have to tell you, right?"

As Schanke rattled on, Nick picked up the files from his desk, put them into a neat pile, then dropped them on Schanke's blotter. "There's the ATM paperwork. And the Kenko preliminaries. And I don't want you to tell me *anything*, Schanke. Not a single thing."

"Don't I at least get a 'thank you,' for covering for you?"

Holding his temper, Nick placed his hand on the desk and stared across the squad room. "No," he answered, after a moment. "And I'll tell you something else. Next time Myra's cousin Agnes calls, I'm going to tell her you're in. In fact," he headed toward the door, but turned to point at Schanke, "I'm going to tell her you're dying to try that new diet stuff she's selling and to put you down for two of *everything*!"

Knowing enough not to keep Dorian waiting, Nick headed out of the station, Schanke's voice echoing behind him, "But they were such nice people . . . ."

He was barely out the door before he spotted Dorian, standing beside his Caddy.

"Vivian's gone ahead," Dorian explained, walking around to the passenger side. He ran his hand along the line of the roof. "Convertible. '63 model?"

"'62," corrected Nick. He walked to the driver's door and opened it, but paused, the keys dangling from his hand. "Would you like to—?"

Dorian waved him inside, opening the passenger door. "Thank you, no. I've gotten used to being chauffeured. One of the perks of the position, I suppose." Once inside the car, he buckled the seatbelt, then turned his head to look behind. "Lots of trunk space?"

"The largest."

"So I've heard." Shaking his head, Dorian rested his arm against the open window frame. "I thought we were doomed when those Japanese toys with engines hit the market. And have you been to Europe in the past ten years?"

Nick concentrated on the simple things—put the key in the ignition, turn it, press the accelerator, start the engine . . . . "No."

"Most of them don't even have trunks. If it wasn't for the cellars in the old cities, I would've roasted a half dozen times. Not that there aren't a few of you who wouldn't have been happy to hear that."

Nick kept his expression neutral and his eyes on the road. "I suppose it comes with the territory."

"That. And a lot more." Dorian chuckled beneath his breath. "At least *you* learn from your experience. Knowing LaCroix was your master, I half expected to find the old buzzard here to defend you, or that you'd run off on me. He ran from me twice, you know."

Nick started, daring a glance at Dorian, but the vampire was looking out the window. "That time . . . with Janette?"

"Was the second time. When you and I met." Again, he chuckled. This time, his eyes were directed ahead, out the windshield. "The first was when I interviewed LaCroix, himself."

When there was no further explanation, Nick dared another glance. "What happened?"

He caught a sparkle from Dorian's dark eyes and looked back to the road quickly. "That's one of the rules. I don't talk about anyone else's interview. What you say to me is between us. It goes no further." Then, he cleared his throat. "You're still close to Janette, yes?"

"In a manner of speaking."

"I saw her, earlier this evening. She's done well for herself with that club. I'm surprised LaCroix permits it." Then he shrugged. "If you wish to know, ask Janette. She was there at the time, if memory serves. But if I were you, I wouldn't ask LaCroix." Dorian's chuckle was dark and deep. "No, I certainly *wouldn't* do that."

Nick remained silent. Either Dorian didn't know that he'd destroyed LaCroix more than a year ago, or he was trying to lead him into admitting his guilt in the matter. Was that what this was all about? Yes, he was coming close to his eighth century and had never been interviewed . . . but was that what Dorian was here to do? To try him for the murder of LaCroix?

Dorian asked no further questions, simply staring out the window, lost in thought. Nick was just as happy not to make further conversation. It was only as they approached the warehouse in which his loft was located that Dorian seemed to awaken. As they pulled up, Nick spotted another car. Vivian stood beside it, leaning on the driver's side door.

"Always punctual," commented Dorian, raising his hand in a wave, as the Caddy passed the parked car and turned toward the garage.

Nick waited for the garage door opener to activate, then drove the car inside as Dorian added, "That's a very rare quality in mortals. They think they have all the time in the world."

"I'm surprised to see her with you." Nick turned the key, glancing quickly at Dorian, before he opened the car door. "A mortal, I mean. You used to surround yourself with Enforcers."

"They grew tiresome after a few centuries—no sense of humor and no aptitude for irony." Dorian closed the passenger door behind him, then stared across the top of the car. "It *shouldn't* surprise you—aren't I allowed the privilege of having someone? Eternity can be a very cold and lonely place, without these brief, warm, mortal lights to cheer our way. Surely you have someone of your own?"

Thankfully, Vivian appeared at the garage door, two paper grocery sacks in her arms. Nick was rescued from having to answer by moving toward her. "Let me take those—"

"Ever the gallant," said Dorian, from behind him. "The world's outgrown chivalry, Nick."

But Vivian surrendered the heavy bags gratefully and the smile he received for his pains was heart-rendingly sincere. "Thanks. Dorian's right—you can't even find a Boy Scout anymore to help you across the street."

"There's your solution, Vivian." Passing Nick, Dorian took Vivian's arm, looping it through his. "Look for Nick. I'm certain he helps old ladies to cross streets and rescues cats from tree with alarming regularity. Or . . . is that what firemen do? The cats-from-trees thing, I mean."

Nick carefully punched in his access code. Dorian never bothered to offer to take the bags from him and his eyes were elsewhere, but Nick had no delusions—the code was inscribed in Dorian's memory. Not that gaining entry to the loft would ever have been a problem for a vampire . . . .

There were no further comments made during the brief elevator ride. Dorian's eyes drifted over everything, as if he were memorizing every detail, down to the studs in the metal. And every time Nick looked up, Vivian's eyes were on him. He smiled at her, but she looked away, back to Dorian as if to check that she hadn't been caught, then down at the floor quickly. Nick recognized the furtive look as that of a animal caught in a trap.

But Dorian didn't seem to notice. When the elevator door opened, he hung back. It took Nick a moment to remember old customs. Turning, he gestured into the loft with the bags. "Make yourself at home. It's not much, but it's mine."

"It keeps the rain off—that's what counts. And—" As Dorian entered, he waved toward the windows, "The light?"

"Shutters." Walking into the kitchen with the bags, Nick paused to nod toward the remote, which sat on the edge of the couch. "Everything's electronic, with a central

control."

"Modern technology." Dorian walked away, into the depths of the loft.

Vivian followed Nick into the kitchen, then reached for one of the bags as he placed it on the counter. "Thanks again."

"No problem." He met her gaze, but when she looked away, he leaned close to her, his voice low. "Are you okay?"

"Fine. Yes, I'm . . . fine." Her wan smile was obviously forced. Suddenly business-like, she reached into the bags and withdrew a can of instant coffee. "Just need a pick-me-up, that's all. You have a pot?"

Nick looked around the kitchen. "I know Nat—I know there's one here someplace." He reached down to open a cabinet, but she placed her hand over his, then inclined her head toward the rest of the apartment. "Thanks, Nick, but I'll take care of it. Why don't you give him the grand tour?"

He hesitated, but she gave him a nod and added, "It's okay. It's what I do. Go ahead. Show off the place. Like you said—you've earned it."

"All right. But . . . we'll talk later. If you want."

"That'd be nice."

Nick watched as she continued to take items from the bag, then moved back into the larger portion of the loft. Dorian was standing below one of his paintings, staring up at it. "You've changed quite a bit since we've met, Nick. Primitive, but showing promise." Turning, he made a dismissive gesture with his hand. "But what do *I* know—I'm an historian, not an art critic." Taking a few steps back, Dorian gestured at the second floor, then around at the room. "Bit large for just you, isn't it?"

"It's home. For now."

"Yes. A far cry from some of the places we used to frequent, eh?" Chuckling, Dorian walked over to the large black dining table. "I suppose you have to be careful about flaunting your wealth, with your choice of profession. Wouldn't want to give the impression of a cop on the take." Seating himself at the head of the table, Dorian slung himself sideways upon the chair and nodded. "So far, I very much approve. You've done better than I would've expected from one of LaCroix's get. Much better."

Again, Nick was saved from answering by the arrival of Vivian. She carried a green bottle in one hand and a pair of wine glasses in the other, which she set carefully on the table before Dorian. Without waiting for any response, she turned and walked back into the kitchen.

Which seemed just as well, because Dorian seized the bottle immediately and pried the cork from the lip. "Something I picked up from Janette earlier this evening," he explained, sniffing at the cork. "It's supposed to be one of her better vintages. We mustn't forget custom, after all these years. Since you're the Master here—" Dorian poured the mix of human blood and alcohol into a glass and offered it to Nick.

His nostrils flared at the scent and it took most of his willpower to be able to stare at that glass and not take it. "No. Thank you, but . . . no."

Suspicious, Dorian lifted the glass to his nose and sniffed. "Why? That little minx hasn't laced it with garlic, I hope. She always did have a soft spot, where you were concerned—"

"Janette wouldn't risk her life on something that stupid."

"You'd be surprised." Dorian raised the glass, then shrugged, as if accepting the fact that it hadn't been tampered with. "I know you haven't completely abstained—you're still here after all," he wondered aloud, still holding the glass aloft. "And if you work in such close quarters with mortals, you *must* be feeding . . . ."

Vivian returned to the table, a different bottle in her hand, the cork already removed. "I'm sorry, Nick," she apologized. "I found this in your fridge. I automatically assumed—hadn't thought—"

"It's all right," he said quickly, daring a glance back at Dorian and reaching for the bottle she held. "I'll do it."

Vivian maintained her hold on the bottle. She poured the glass of cow's blood for him, but Dorian intercepted it. Placing his own glass on the table, he lifted Nick's and sniffed. "Oh. Cow." Smiling, he put the glass down on the table and slid it against Nick's hand. "Whatever must your Janette think of that, I wonder?" Then, Dorian raised his own glass, waiting.

Nick slowly placed his fingers around the stem of the glass, his eyes on the red liquid. For the past month, Natalie had been monitoring his blood consumption, keeping careful records about the when and how much, then matching it against his own blood chemistry. He had no idea how the experiment was proceeding. She usually made non-committal noises and muttered something about not having enough data yet. This glass would put him over his scheduled blood intake. He had no idea what it would do to her data.

Then again, he had no idea what he was going to do about Dorian.

Slowly, Nick raised the glass, meeting Dorian's silent toast. The blood, cow though it was, slid down his throat easily. He was hungry, had been hungry, since Natalie's latest experiment had started. It took an effort on his part not to drain the glass to the dregs and pour himself another.

But he managed some restraint, drinking only half the glass in the first swallow, then setting it down on the table before him. Dorian was watching him. Nick stared back at those coal black eyes.

And Dorian smiled, just before raising his own glass to his lips again. "I think you're going to be an interesting interview. A *very* interesting interview."

One hand resting on the table, Nick looked away. He caught sight of Vivian in the kitchen, a coffee cup raised to her lips. "Look, could we get this over with? I've got a job to do. And Schanke's volunteered information notwithstanding, I have plans for my days off. So if we

could—"

The base of Dorian's glass clattered against the table top, catching Nick's attention. "*I* choose the time and the place. That's another rule." He touched his finger along the top of his glass. "It's very simple, really. I ask questions. And you answer them. If you give me a sufficient answer, we proceed to the next question. If I don't like the answer, I'll ask again. And again. And again. Until I get an answer that satisfies me. And don't think you can lie—" Those dark eyes fastened on his again. "Because I *know*. Ask Janette."

Nick made a mental note to do just that. "So . . . when?"

"I'll let you know tomorrow. I'll need to prepare my questions," he gestured around at the loft, "now that I've some reference to work from. Vivian will stop by for some preliminary information tomorrow evening, before you leave for your . . . shift—is that what you call it?"

"Good."

A smile hovered at the edges of Dorian's lips. "You don't have to like me, Nick. And you don't have to hate me. It's what I do."

"Maybe I hate what you do." Picking up the glass of blood, he downed the rest of it and rose from his chair. "Or maybe I hate the fact that you enjoy it so much."

But Dorian remained seated, the smile fixed on his face. "*Very* interesting interview," he murmured, as he sipped slowly from his glass.

Nick didn't know what else could be said. But if he got rid of Dorian—and Vivian—he'd be able to talk to Janette. And he had a feeling *that* particular interview might give him some of the pieces he needed to work out this puzzle. Just as he was about to ask Dorian to leave, he heard the elevator motor begin to run. But who?

Natalie. He'd forgotten she was coming by, hadn't realized it was so late . . . .

Trying not to alert Dorian, he walked toward the elevator door, needing to intercept her before she entered. But Dorian was beside him as the door opened and Nat walked in.

"Hi, Nick. You look great, what have—oh!" Natalie's hands tightened on the handle of her medical bag. Eyeing Dorian, she asked, "Am I interrupting something? Because I'll just leave—"

Dorian placed himself between her and the closing elevator door. "Are you Dr. Lambert, by any chance? Detective Schanke said something about you, I think. Nick, aren't you going to do the honors? Or does your gallantry only extend as far as carrying in a lady's packages?"

Natalie's eyes went wide as she met Nick's gaze, the question as to what Dorian might be, unspoken in the glance. He nodded, very slightly, and her eyes went even wider. "Nat, this is Dorian. Dorian, this is Natalie Lambert. She's a County Coroner. We work together."

Dorian shook her hand. "A pleasure to meet you. As I said, Detective Schanke mentioned you in passing." Releasing her hand, he met Nick's eyes. "And Nick's right—I'm one of *them*."

A sudden tension in her shoulders was the only clue that she was considering just how to reply, whether to admit that she knew what 'them' meant, and fighting the urge to look for Nick to give her a hint. "Any friend of Nick's—"

"He's not a friend," corrected Nick. Then, as Natalie *did* look at him, added, "More of an acquaintance," to calm that sliver of fear he saw sparkle in her eyes.

"An *old* acquaintance," corrected Dorian. Returning to his seat at the table, he poured himself another glass of human blood. "When I first met Nick, he was a pale shadow of his master. Little more than a thug, actually." He gestured toward the table. "Please, Dr. Lambert, have a seat. If you'd like something, I think Vivian's preparing some coffee."

Natalie mouthed the name to Nick, as Dorian turned his head toward the kitchen. Nick gestured with his hand, trying to indicate that Vivian was a mortal, like Natalie. She nodded, just as Dorian turned back to them, then she put on that professional demeanor that Nick had watched her use to face down predatory defense attorneys and obstreperous lab personnel alike. But she was out of her element and they both knew it.

Only Natalie couldn't begin to guess just how far out of her element she might be. By even admitting that she knew vampires existed, she was putting herself in danger—Nick well remembered the Enforcers had been Dorian's shadows, for centuries. But there might be a way around it, if he could get Natalie to cooperate.

"Nat, you know where the coffee pot is, don't you?" asked Nick, holding up his palms, as if he were at a loss. "Vivian was asking, but I don't know where I saw it last—"

"What?" She was staring at the bottle of cow's blood on the table, then glared at him, knowing that he was trying to get rid of her. But when he narrowed his eyes slightly, she relented, her reluctance and annoyance very evident. "Oh . . . yeah. And we need to talk. About buying more filters. *And* coffee."

"I'll make a list," he promised.

"Yeah. You do that." As she left the table, she grabbed his empty wine glass. "Why don't I rinse this out for you, while I'm near the sink?"

Inwardly, Nick groaned—she'd seen the bottle and the glass. There'd be hell to pay later, when she read him the riot act about screwing up her data and how the hell was she supposed to help him when he wouldn't help himself. But he'd deserve it. If he could only keep her alive long enough to deliver the lecture . . . .

Dorian was biting back a smile, watching what he could see of Vivian and Natalie becoming acquainted in the kitchen. His voice low, he said, "She's immune to mesmerism, isn't she? The best often are."

"She's not a problem."

"She *could* be. In time."

"She's bound to me."

It was a lie, a calculated risk. Dorian never batted an eyelash. "Is she? I'd think you'd try harder to keep her under control."

"I don't *want* her 'under control.'"

Dorian rose from his chair as Natalie entered, a cup of coffee in her hands and a forced smile on her face. "Vivian found the pot by herself."

"Vivian's very capable," said Dorian. Pulling out her chair for her, he stood to one side as Natalie seated herself. "Always in control. That's what Nick and I were discussing just now, control. This is what I mean, Nick—"

Natalie had no sooner placed her cup on the table before Dorian's left hand curled around her neck, pinning her body against the back of the chair. Eyes red-gold, he darted toward the carotid artery on the right side of Natalie's neck.

Instantly, Nick was on his feet, fangs extended, his leap stopped only by an unwavering cry of "Nick!" from Natalie. Even as he snarled, her lips formed the word 'no.'

Remaining very still, she stared at him, eyes wide and fearful, but pleading with him not to move. "I'm fine," she said softly, as Dorian straightened behind her, his arm still around her neck. "I'm . . . okay."

If Dorian had been serious, there wouldn't have been any time to save her. But Dorian had done nothing more than frighten her, frighten both of them, not even grazing her neck. Nick turned away for a moment, unable to look at Natalie, to meet her eyes, changed as he was. And once his own fangs had retracted and his eyes had returned to normal, it was Dorian's black gaze he met.

"*Don't* play false with me." Dorian stared, eyes cold and unyielding. "This time, I concede the forfeit. Next time, you won't be so lucky." As Nick watched, Dorian slowly released his arm from Natalie's throat, backing away. "Dr. Lambert, please excuse me." He brushed the back of her hand with his fingers, where it still rested on the table, beside her coffee cup. Then he returned to his seat . . . and his glass of blood. "I can't apologize enough."

Color rose to Natalie's cheeks as she turned to glare at Dorian. "Maybe you should give it a shot."

"Nat—" warned Nick, under his breath.

She wouldn't look at him, continuing to stare at Dorian, her anger unabated.

Dorian cleared his throat, then lifted a hand, waving Nick back to his chair. "She's right. I owe her an apology. She isn't one of us and isn't bound by the Code—I've got no claim on her and certainly no right to treat her that way." Turning his attention toward Natalie, he smiled. "Ah, but what a brave and true heart you are, Dr. Lambert. I've known vampires centuries old who would've begged for mercy in such a situation. I hope Nick agrees to bring you across, and soon. We're the less for not having you among us."

Natalie stiffened, her back going ramrod straight as she glanced quickly at Nick, then back at Dorian. "I don't think—"

"Nat's not interested in coming across," answered Nick, cutting her off quickly.

"No? That's a shame. Well, maybe you'll change your mind, in time. My Vivian—ah, here she is."

Seemingly oblivious to what had just happened, Vivian returned to the table with another one of Janette's bottles, handing it to Dorian. He took it from her, placing it on the table, then rested his hand around her waist. In turn, she draped her arm around his neck, leaning her weight against him. "My Vivian can't wait to turn, can you?" He gazed up at her. "That's all she ever asks of me. But I'm not a fool. You can find a willing convert in any dance club in the world. But executive secretaries who know enough to close the blinds—they're the *real* treasure."

Despite Dorian's words, Vivian seemed uneasy. Once again, she met Nick's eyes, then looked quickly away. And in that brief meeting, he'd seen the look of a trapped animal again.

Picking up his wine glass, Dorian gestured toward Natalie. "I'm curious—how did you meet Nick?"

Nick took a step toward Dorian. "You're not here to interview *her*."

"True." Dorian never moved, never indicated that he took Nick's proximity as a threat. "Dr. Lambert's under no compunction to answer any of my questions. Or tell me the truth." He sipped from his glass, then shrugged. "But it doesn't hurt to ask."

Nick looked back at Natalie. Her hands were on either side of her coffee cup, as if she were warming them. He thought he saw the barest shaking of her fingers, as they curled around the handle. "I guess," she said, after a pause. "I guess you could say we first met in a . . . professional situation."

"Professional?" Dorian frowned, as he sipped from his glass and looked up at Nick. "Before you joined the local law enforcement, yes? And Dr. Lambert is a . . . County Coroner?" A smile slid across his lips and he raised his glass to Natalie. "That must have been a rude awakening. For the both of you."

"It isn't every day one of my patients sits up on the table, if that's what you mean," countered Natalie. When she looked up at Nick, he saw that she was wearing a wan smile, which he echoed. "We've been friends for a while, now."

"I assume you're still his doctor, then. Because I can't understand why any vampire would limit himself to *this* of his own volition." Dorian released Vivian and reached forward to pick up the bottle of cow's blood.

"That's *my* choice," said Nick, taking the bottle from Dorian's hands, without warning. After holding it for a moment, he put it back down on the table, deliberately placing it beyond his own immediate reach.

Noticing the move, Nat gave him an encouraging smile. "If it was up to me, he'd be off the stuff altogether." Picking up her coffee, she shrugged lightly. "But we're working on it."

"Really?"

Nick couldn't help but draw a breath at Dorian's sudden interest—the last thing Dorian needed to know was how desperately he wanted to return across that wide void between eternity and mortality. "Nat's been working on some questions I have about how our physiology differs from mortals."

Dorian spared him a glance, then turned his attention back to Natalie. "It's been some time since I've spoken with anyone on *that* subject. It's an interesting field."

"You mean—someone else has looked into this?"

Natalie's curiosity was evident from her tone of voice—her eyes sparkled as Dorian nodded his assent. "Yes. I've spoken to several individuals over the centuries." Then, glancing at Nick, he added, "That's right—you don't know, do you? I'm the Archivist, Dr. Lambert. The Code requires that all aspects of vampire history be recorded and stored. Which means . . . I may just have something you'd find useful in your research. Perhaps we could discuss this further—"

"That wouldn't be possible," said Nick quickly. "Natalie works, Dorian."

"Which means she has time off, just as you do. Don't be so protective of her, Nick. The lady's proven she can handle herself admirably. And as you said earlier, I'm here to interview *you*, not her." Reaching into his rear jeans pocket, Dorian withdrew a billfold, which he opened. He took a card from it, placed it on the table and used a pen from his shirt pocket to scribble down an address. "We've rented a house in the suburbs—York, I think it's called. It's isolated enough for my purposes." Returning the billfold to his pocket, Dorian slid the card across the table, to where Natalie was sitting. "Feel free to drop by tomorrow, Dr. Lambert, if you can. I'm usually available a few hours before sunset."

Natalie picked up the card, glanced at it, then looked up at Nick. "I really don't know—"

"I give you my word," said Dorian, meeting her eyes with a steady gaze, "there'll be no repeat of tonight's performance. My actions were in poor taste and I owe you a debt of apology. Please, consider it as a favor, to me. I'd enjoy answering questions, for a change." He turned his eyes to Nick. "Your calming influence may even lead me to deal more gently with our friend, here."

Reaching over, Nick took the card from Natalie's hand and tore it in half. He dropped the pieces to the table. "I don't think so." Ignoring Natalie's glare, he never looked away from Dorian. "In fact, I think Nat mentioned something about having to leave."

Dorian rose to his feet, picking up the sealed bottle of blood and handing it to Vivian. "No, don't leave on our account. I can see we've over-stayed our welcome." He picked up the first bottle he'd opened earlier and held it to up to the light. "No sense in letting this go to waste." Tipping his head back, Dorian drained the bottle to the dregs in a swallow. When the empty bottle glass bottle clanged against the table, his eyes were more red than black.

Nick stood his ground, fighting back the urge to snarl, in answer to that red-black challenge. "I'll show you to the door."

"No need. I'll find the way." Slipping his arm through Vivian's, he nodded toward Nick. "You'll hear from me, tomorrow." His stern expression lightened as he moved forward, toward Natalie. "It was pleasure meeting you. I hope you'll accept my invitation, Dr. Lambert. I don't make them often, or lightly. Good day."

Nick watched as Vivian and Dorian walked to the elevator. At one point, Vivian turned her head, giving him a wistful glance over her shoulder. Then the elevator door closed behind them and they were gone.

For a moment, he stared at the elevator door, fury at Dorian's arrogance raging inside him. But when the sound of a coffee cup clattering against a saucer caught his attention, he glanced down at Natalie . . . and the memory of Dorian's arm around her neck, fangs at her throat, turned the focus of the anger from Dorian to himself. Moving around the table, toward her, he said, "Nat—I'm sorry. There wasn't time to warn you—"

She barely met his eyes before pushing back her chair and rising, but in that brief glance, and the chair she kept between them, he felt something tear at his heart. "It's my own fault. I walked into it." Picking up the coffee cup and the saucer, she moved to take Dorian's wine glass, which still had blood in it—but her hand froze and she drew it back quickly. "It's not even like I buzz before I walk in. Geez, how stupid am I?" Turning, she headed toward the kitchen, still avoiding him. "It's . . . rude. That's what it is. Rude."

Intercepting her, Nick placed his hands on her forearms, but she still wouldn't meet his eyes. "I'm sorry he scared you."

That's when Natalie looked up. A sudden glint of anger lurked in her eyes and tinted her words. "Oh, we're beyond scared, Nick. *Way* beyond scared. I'm not even sure *terrified* covers it." Backing away, she walked around him, depositing the dishes in the sink. "Who the hell is he, anyway?"

"Just what he said." Nick walked back to the dining table. On a whim, he picked up Dorian's wine glass and tilted it, watching the blood race around the inside. "He's Dorian, the Archivist. He keeps the records. It's part of the Code."

Natalie raised her voice above the running water. "You mean, he was on the level about having information about vampire physiology?"

Still fascinated by the blood in the glass, Nick tilted it in the other direction. "Probably. He's been at this for centuries. He's the only one with access to the records—that's part of the Code, too." Sighing, he walked back into the kitchen, still turning the stem of the glass between his fingers. "No warning—there he is. And then it's your turn to be interviewed."

"Right. You kept mentioning that—both of you."

Turning, Natalie plucked the glass from his hand. "I'll take that, thanks."

Nick followed her back to the sink and leaned forward, licking his lips as the human blood disappeared down the drain. Then he looked away, when he realized that Natalie was watching him carefully. "I guess I screwed up your data, huh?"

She frowned, then dipped the glass in the soapy water she'd used to fill one of the double sinks. "Depends. How much did you have?"

"A glass."

"A . . . glass." Giving him a half-smile, Natalie dipped the wine glass into the water, then held the water-filled glass at eye level. "Six ounces, at a guess." Shrugging, she dumped the water back into the sink. "We'll do the cell count tomorrow. It shouldn't throw me off too badly—*if* you're a good boy and halve your blood intake tomorrow."

Nick winced at her questioning glance. "Ouch. You're tough—anybody ever tell you that?"

"But fair." Rinsing the glass, she handed it to him. "Dry."

When he stared at her blankly, she picked up a dish towel and threw it at him. "That's for the 'Vivian needs help in the kitchen' business."

"Oh. Yeah." Nick toweled off the glass, replaced it on the shelf, then turned back for the cup and saucer. "I was trying to keep you out of harm's way."

"Didn't work, did it?"

He froze, nearly dropping the coffee cup. "No. It didn't."

"So next time, don't try so hard. I can handle myself."

"Not against Dorian."

Natalie looked up again at his tone of voice, absently washing off the other wine glass. "So, what *is* he? Other than an archivist?"

"*The* Archivist," corrected Nick. Still drying the coffee cup, he turned, leaning against the sink. "He's got ties to the Enforcers—they get their information from him. Which is why he does the interviews. He asks the questions, you answer. Then he goes away. And sometimes—" Nick looked down at the cup in his hands. "Sometimes the vampire being interviewed . . . disappears."

"Oh." Natalie placed the wet wine glass carefully on the counter, then met his eyes. "Oh. Which means he's judge, jury—"

"And the Enforcers serve as executioner. They uphold the Code. And if Dorian discovers that the Code's been broken . . . ."

A light smile touched Natalie's lips. "So, he's an informant. You're used to dealing with informants. Lie to him." Her smile faded as he looked away, refusing to meet her eyes. "But . . . you can't, can you? He said—can he *really* tell when you're lying?"

"Dorian says he can. I never believed it."

"It's dry, Nick. The pattern's *supposed* to stay on the cup."

"What?" Nick stared at her, then down at the cup. Smiling sheepishly, he put it on the counter and then picked up the rinsed wine glass. "I'll talk to Janette about her interview tomorrow."

"Dorian interviewed *Janette?*"

"A long time ago," answered Nick. He walked over to the shelf and placed the wine glass with its mate. "That's the first time I ran into him—literally."

"But . . . she didn't disappear." Natalie pulled the plug from the drain, then caught the dish towel he tossed to her. "Maybe you're making too much of this."

"Maybe." Nick leaned his back against the counter, watching Natalie dry her hands.

She paused. "But—?"

"But, maybe Janette didn't break the Code."

Her eyes widened slightly. "Someday, we've gotta have a long talk about this Code of yours."

Nick chuckled. "Well, that'd be one way of breaking it."

"Great." Natalie walked back to the dining room table and picked up the empty wine bottle from the table. "And I guess me knowing about you—?"

"Gray area," said Nick, following her. He caught the bottle she threw to him and placed it on the counter. "Not the letter of the Code, but the intent."

Lifting the bottle of cow blood, Natalie glanced back at him. "Then, all of Dorian's questions—he was trying to find out how much I really knew?"

"Could be. He's got carte blanche—he can say anything he wants to just about anyone and get away with it. It could just be that you interested him."

"Or he could try to use me against you?"

Walking over to Natalie, he lifted the bottle of cow blood from her hands. "Nothing you said tonight would have counted. It has to be during the interview. If he asks me a question about it . . . ." Shrugging, he left her and moved to the refrigerator. "But that's not what worries me."

Natalie blinked. "It isn't?"

Nick opened the refrigerator door. He placed the bottle of blood on the top shelf, then closed the door and leaned against it. "I don't think he knows LaCroix's been destroyed. Or, he could be here because he *does* know . . . ."

". . .That you killed him," finished Natalie. She picked up the pieces of the business card from the table. "I suppose killing another vampire is a breach of your Code."

"Depends." Hands in his pockets, Nick walked into the living room. He turned in place, his perfect memory replaying the scene in every detail. The smell of the fire; LaCroix's eyes going wide, as the burning wood pierced his chest. His own voice whispered in his ear '*Va au diable* . . . .'

"Nick?"

Shaking his head, he picked up the remote and pointed it at the shutters, blocking out the rays of light he

knew were no more than minutes away. "It depends on the circumstances."

"What about . . . Richard?"

Nick paused for a moment and looked down at the floor, not daring to meet Natalie's eyes. "That was different."

"Why? Because you brought him across?"

He looked up at her and nodded, hesitantly. With a shrug and half-smile, he turned away, tossing the remote onto the couch. "Yeah. Something like that."

"But killing your master is breaking the Code."

Hearing the word from Natalie's lips, in her voice, made him uneasy. "More or less. Like I said, it's the circumstances, one of the gray areas." Nick turned away. "It's getting late, Nat. Go home. I'll see you tonight, at work."

"What happens if you don't answer the questions Dorian asks?"

"Nat—"

"What *happens*?"

He knew that insistent note in her voice too well—it brought back the night she'd tried to talk him into bringing Richard across. "There isn't any choice. If you run, the Enforcers go after you. If you stay, you face Dorian." Turning back to her, he shrugged, implying what he hoped was indifference. "Like you said, I'm probably making too much of it."

Her eyes indicated that she wasn't buying it, but Natalie gave him a wan smile. "Yeah. Probably." She picked up her bag from the floor, then glanced down at her watch. "Gee, look at the time. I'd better get going."

He kept pace with her, paralleling her every step, so that they met at the elevator door. Nick reached past her to hit the button and she jumped back, startled, then looked away quickly. A lump rose in his throat—this time he knew for certain that the flash of fear had been because of *him*. "Nat—I'm sorry. About what happened—"

Again, her eyes met his and again she smiled, even though it was forced. "I told you, it wasn't your fault. Well, not completely." When Nick pulled back in surprise, she shook her finger at him. "It's just that, well, the next time you and Dorian get into this 'my fangs are bigger than your fangs' macho crap, you can leave me out of it. Deal?"

"Deal," he promised.

For a moment, Nick stared down into her eyes. Dorian's words echoed in his memory—'Surely you have someone of your own?' In that instant, he could have answered, 'yes,' and not even Dorian could have said he'd spoken falsely. Dorian was right, Natalie had a brave heart . . . and true.

Then the elevator door slid open. Natalie slipped quickly inside, barely giving him more than a supportive smile. And the shadow behind her eyes shattered that unspoken 'yes' into a thousand, sharp-edged splinters.

Nick rested his back against the closed elevator door and looked across the loft. Again, he could see the flames rising. The wood was in his hand, alight, the crunch as he shoved the spear into LaCroix's chest, pushing him backward. *'Va au diable,'* was whispered in each flicker of the flames, the light dancing across Alyce's pale, drained face . . . .

Brushing a hand across his eyes, he stumbled forward, fighting down the need for blood. It took a conscious effort on his part to walk away from the refrigerator, to push back that part of him that wanted to drown the memories and the fear and the stress in a thick, salty, crimson stream. But memory could be turned against itself—the image of Natalie's eyes, disappointed and angered when she saw the bottle of blood on the table and the empty glass in front of him, helped him win the battle. As did the supportive smile when, hands covered in soapsuds, she forgave him the lapse and found a way around it.

Exhausted, he fell onto the couch. Something was gnawing at the corner of his mind, something that should have been important. Call Janette—yes, but in the evening. Although she'd probably only hang up on him again. What he had to ask, about Dorian and the interview, could only be asked in person. And if she hadn't answered him when it had happened, almost seven centuries before, how would he convince her to tell him *now*?

There was something else, but it eluded him, slipping away as his eyes closed, his last thoughts of Natalie. She'd forgiven him yet another lapse, and would have forgiven him even more readily if she'd known anything about Dorian. He couldn't have refused Dorian's silent toast, even if his glass had been filled with holy water instead of cow blood. What Dorian wanted, Dorian got.

And so the memory of the torn business card, which he'd last seen in Natalie's hands, was lost to dark dreams and bloody memories and a promised invitation to a dinner-dance that he wasn't certain he'd be around to attend.

CHAPTER FOUR

AT FIRST, Natalie thought the map had been wrong. The drive she followed wandered through rolling hills covered with finely manicured grass and few trees—it looked very much like a golf course without sand traps. Her heart rose in her throat when she caught a glimpse of a large, stone mansion in the distance when her car crested the top of a rise. But the road turned away from that, eventually ending at a small, one story dwelling, with a circular car park at the side.

There were two other mid-size cars in the lot, both with rental plates, neither overly grand or flashy. The house seemed to have been converted from either a small stable or out-building of some type. It, too, was so completely ordinary, like the cars, that the knot in the pit of her stomach started to unravel. From the moment that she'd picked up the pieces of Dorian's business card from the table last night and tucked them in her pocket—while Nick wasn't looking—that knot had been growing in size and complexity.

She'd barely slept, the memory of Dorian's breath on her neck and his arm around her throat diametrically opposed to the image of Nick, leaning over her as she waited for the elevator. He'd had *that* look in his eyes. Natalie was never certain whether he was looking at her, really looking at her, or some memory from his past, or was seeing past the surface of her self, to some place down deep in her soul. The possibility of its having been the latter was what had given her the courage to drive out here. Something within her told her that Dorian hadn't been lying—he might very well go easier on Nick if she accepted his invitation. It was a chance she had to take, or risk losing the first vampire she'd ever encountered, who'd gone from curiosity, to friend, to . . . part of her life.

Leaving her car beside the others, Natalie walked up the gravel path to the front of the house. She pressed the button for the bell and was pleased to find that her hands weren't shaking. Her bag strap was over her shoulder and she held her hand over the closed flap possessively, knowing that the zippered section beneath the flap was open. Experience with vampires—particularly the bit last night with Dorian—had taught her to be prepared for anything.

The door opened inward. Vivian stood in the small hallway, wearing jeans and a beige blouse. "Dr. Lambert? I see Dorian was right, he said you'd be here. I didn't believe him. Won't you come in?"

Natalie hesitated only a moment, before walking into that all-too-normal house. "Thanks."

But once the door had closed behind her, the oddities were immediately noticeable. Every lamp in the place was on, bathing the interior in a false form of daylight. The windows, even the fanlight, were completely sealed by heavy, black cloth, which, on closer inspection, had been stapled directly into the wallboard. The impression was that the house was in mourning, but whether for itself or its temporary occupants, she couldn't decide.

"This way." Vivian led her down the narrow hallway to a door. Natalie hung back as Vivian opened the door and entered the room. "Dorian, you were right. She's here."

Peering over Vivian's shoulder, Natalie saw that the large living room was no different than the rest of the house, containing comfortable, modern furniture. The windows to either side of the room had been sealed, but all of the lights in the room were on. Dorian was sitting at a couch, a briefcase open on the glass coffee table before him. There was a carafe and two coffee mugs on the table, as well as an arrangement of fresh daisies. Glancing up from the papers in his hand, Dorian nodded at Vivian, then smiled when he saw Natalie behind her.

The papers were dropped into the briefcase and the case was shut and locked in one fluid movement. Rising to his feet, he snagged the handle of the case and placed it on edge, on the floor, before walking forward to meet her. "Dr. Lambert—I'm honored. Thank you for accepting my invitation."

Stepping into the room and around Vivian, Natalie shook his hand. There was nothing in his appearance or manner that would have stopped that knot of tension within her from unraveling. Wearing a charcoal gray suit and a matching silk tie, Dorian looked like a stockbroker.

She must have been staring, because he raised an eyebrow. "What?"

And Natalie couldn't help but smile. "You don't look like a vampire."

"Don't tell me that Nick is into that cape and dinner suit business—he doesn't seem the type." When she shook her head, her smile fading at the mention of Nick's name, Dorian ducked his head almost shyly. "It's best to take that as a compliment, I suppose. I'd suggest, though, that you didn't mix up our coffee cups." Turning away from her, he walked back to the L-shaped couch, gesturing to the end, where she'd be the furthest from him. "You *will* have coffee, I assume?"

"Yes, thanks." Natalie walked to the place he indicated and seated herself on the coral cushions, her bag still at her side. Vivian leaned over her, picking up the carafe and pouring coffee into a mug, which sat on the coffee table in front of her seat. "Although I'm not thrilled you took for granted that I was going to show."

"Let's call it wishful thinking." Picking up the handle of the briefcase, Dorian flipped it on edge, passing it to Vivian. "Take care of this for me, would you? And, did you call Berlin?"

"They're signing the deal tomorrow, at nine A.M."

"Good. That would be—" Dorian closed his eyes, then opened them again. "After all these centuries, I still have problems with these damned time zones. What does it matter—it'll be signed, no matter what the time here." Smiling up at Vivian, he gave her another nod. "You might as well be on your way, then. Unless—" Dorian met Natalie's eyes. "It won't make you uneasy, being here alone with me? Vivian will stay, if you'd prefer?"

"It's fine with me," answered Natalie, with more confidence than she felt. "But if you're worried about your reputation . . . ?"

Dorian chuckled, then gave Vivian a dismissive nod. She flashed Natalie a quick smile, then left, closing the hallway door behind her. "I was right, you *do* have a brave heart. And a sense of humor." Sitting back against the cushions of the couch, he touched his fingernails to his tie, lightly. "I'm surprised Nick let you come here."

"Nick has nothing to say about where I go or who I see."

"Ah. Which means, he doesn't know you're here." Leaning forward, Dorian picked up his own coffee mug. "If it were me, I wouldn't have let you come. But then, I wouldn't have wanted to try to stop you, either. Brave hearts can be very formidable. Especially when they know enough to carry a crucifix and garlic in their handbags." Then, Dorian suddenly seemed uncomfortable, placing his mug back on the table. "I should apologize again about last night. It's only right that you should know what that was all about. And I very much doubt Nick would have told you."

Natalie straightened in her chair, then found herself staring down at her coffee cup as that tiny knot started to reassemble in her stomach—he knew about her small measures of protection. And, what bothered her most, he didn't seem to care. "I'm not certain I want to know."

"But you should, in any case." When she looked up, she found that Dorian was staring at her, with too-sad eyes. "Nick lied to me. He told me you were bound to him."

The lying part she remembered from last night. But the rest— "I don't understand."

"It was a stupid lie. One look at you and I would've known—it was too easy to tell." Shrugging, Dorian picked up his coffee mug and sipped from it.

Natalie tried to ignore the red liquid she saw on his lips. "If you mean, when he tried to hypnotize me . . . he couldn't."

"You're wrong, there. He *could*, but only with your consent. If you surrendered your will, you'd be bound to him." His eyes darkened and he leaned toward her as she

straightened in her seat again. "Don't take offense—he thought he was protecting you. My little object lesson was an attempt to show him how easily I saw through his deception. And that the next time he tried something like that, he might not be so lucky."

Anger had run through her at the suggestion that she'd allow anyone, never mind Nick, such control over her. But then she remembered what Nick had said about her being in danger. "If I *were* bound to Nick, that would fall under the Code?"

"You *do* know, don't you? Effectively, yes."

"Is Vivian bound to you?"

"No. She's devoted to me. I trust her implicitly. And she trusts me." Dorian's eyes widened and he took another sip from his mug, his gaze still locked with hers even as he swallowed. She had a feeling he was choosing his next words carefully. "Dr. Lambert, a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing. The more you know about us, the more you endanger yourself . . . and Nick."

"Which means you're not going to answer my questions." Clutching her bag tightly, Natalie started to rise to her feet, but Dorian lifted his hand to stop her, then leaned forward and placed his coffee cup on the table.

"I didn't say that." When she seated herself, he looked down, at the floor. "There are some questions I can't answer because of the Code. Others . . . I'd prefer not to answer, for personal reasons, and for my own protection. But between those two—" He held his hands apart and looked up at her, "There's quite a bit of latitude."

"All right. How old are you?"

The ghost of a smile slipped across Dorian's face as he reached for his coffee cup again. "That's a difficult question."

"Because of the Code? Or personal reasons?"

"It depends on how you redefine the question. Do you mean, how old was I when I was brought across—?"

"How long have you been a vampire?"

He chuckled aloud again. "I'll have to decline—on both counts. You know how old Nick is?"

For a moment, Natalie wasn't certain she should admit it, but then she nodded.

"I'm older." When she frowned, Dorian lifted his mug to his lips again, hiding his secretive smile. After a moment, he shrugged. "That's all I can say. You can make your own deductions from our conversation. And if you guess rightly or wrongly . . . I *may* let you know."

"Or you may not." Sighing, Natalie reached for her coffee cup and held it in her hands, staring into the dark, hot liquid. "Okay, let's try another approach." She fixed him with a steady gaze. "How'd you become the Archivist, then? What qualifications did you have?"

"Being in the wrong place at the wrong time. An interest in history and an ability to read and write—which were rare enough qualities to be found in a mortal, never mind a vampire." Dorian held up a finger, forestalling the question on her lips, "Which applies to a good part of history, I know—no clues there, Dr. Lambert. Basically I got the job by forfeit. No one else wanted it. And I can't say I didn't try to find some way out myself, the first century or so."

Natalie couldn't help but smile at his frustrated expression. "Am I supposed to be sympathetic?"

"Well . . . yes!" Putting his cup on the table, Dorian rose from the couch and walked over to a painting that hung on the wall. For a moment, he seemed to be studying it. His back was to her, when he finally returned to his original thought. "This artist—for example—has spent a good portion of his mortal life painting. Perhaps for the art of it, perhaps for the money?" Shaking his head, Dorian turned back to Natalie and gave her a wan smile, "And if that's the case, he's a fool *and* bankrupt. But the point being—he only has *one* lifetime to occupy. We have countless lives, limitless hours to fill. And yet, few of us are dedicated enough to pursue occupations in the mortal world, decades at a time. We grow impatient and move onto something else, simply because we *can*, and, lately, because it's not safe to remain too long in one place or one profession."

Natalie put down her coffee cup and looked away, hearing the truth in his words. She'd sat with Nick, when he'd gone through the relics of some of his previous lives. No matter how light his words, how much he smiled, there was always a sharp edge of loss in the memories, a wistful look. He'd never said it aloud, but she knew it was always there— the thought that he might have stayed longer, or had stayed *too* long. Not to mention the mortals whom he'd met, with whom he hadn't shared his secret, who'd been left with no word, no knowledge that he still existed or thought of them. By the time it would be safe to track them down, they'd have been dead for decades. Their children, or their children's children, would greet him as a descendent of father's or grandfather's friend. And the cycle started again.

Her gaze drifted to the daisies on the table—how alike the flowers were! Just like mortals must seems to these long-lived vampires, after so many centuries. If she didn't succeed in bringing Nick back across the dark divide between life and the world in which he existed, would she be replaced by another Natalie—her daughter or granddaughter, or a stranger—who could give him hope for a cure to his condition? Or when this portion of his life, too, passed into a bag of artifacts to be placed in storage, would the memory of her be sealed in the darkness with them?

"Now, you see," said Dorian, returning to his seat, his voice causing her to start out of her woolgathering. "I'm boring you, aren't I? I told you, I'm not used to answering questions."

"No, no—not at all," said Natalie hurriedly. For some reason, she felt embarrassed and reached for her coffee to hide the flush in her cheeks. "It's just that . . . there's so much to think about, isn't there?"

"Consider your own profession—can you imagine being saddled with the same job, for so many centuries?"

Dorian waved his hand in dismissal. "Of course, there *are* benefits; I make my own hours, travel wherever I like. Now that I think about it, I don't know what else I might have done. I should think I would've gone mad by now. Or walked into the sunlight, as have so many before me . . . and since."

Natalie felt the distance between them grow as he spoke, his eyes focused on the flower centerpiece on the table, then beyond that. She'd seen that look in Nick's eyes, as well. The memory of the vampires seemed to be both a blessing . . . and part of their curse. "I suppose you're often lonely."

Dorian started at the statement, meeting her eyes, then looking away quickly. "That wasn't a question."

"No. An observation."

"It might be better if you were less observant."

"For my own safety?" asked Natalie, unable to hide the hint of sarcasm in her voice. "That's the easy answer where you're concerned, isn't it? If you don't want to talk about something, it's passed off as 'something mortal man was not meant to know.'"

Still avoiding her eyes, Dorian smiled and lifted his mug from the table. "Ah, now I think you're talking more about Nick. Although, you're right."

"That you're lonely?"

"That it's a useful evasion." Dorian's eyes glanced downward, at the floor, as he sipped the blood from his mug. Then, he met her relentless gaze again. "And . . . you're correct in the former, as well. Mortals flicker in our sight and are gone far too quickly." Those dark eyes bored into her, as if studying her soul. "Have you considered that a day, a hundred years from now, I'll remember this conversation, sitting here with you—and you'll have long turned to dust?"

Natalie refused to turn away, refused to let him win the round. "*I'm* asking the questions, remember?" And when Dorian leaned forward, returning his mug to the table, she pressed the point. "They're afraid of you, aren't they? The other vampires?"

"And rightfully so." Resting his folded hands on one knee, Dorian looked at her again, his gaze suddenly darker than night and colder than winter—the hesitation, the vulnerability she'd seen a moment before had disappeared into coal-black depths. "Think, Dr. Lambert. You know something of Nick, of what he can do. We could destroy the mortal world as easily as a man might crack the shell of a walnut in his fist. Or, we destroy ourselves by stirring mortals into such fear that they'd destroy *us*. The Code ensures that we survive. The Enforcers protect us from ourselves."

Somehow, the words seemed well-worn and rehearsed. Natalie wondered how many times Dorian had given that speech, justifying his deeds to vampire and mortal alike. Or . . . to himself. "And you help out by telling them who's been naughty or nice?"

He flinched, as if burned. But that cold darkness never left his eyes. "So, you *have* been talking to Nick. I pass along information, when it seems appropriate. Consider it my civic duty. As a . . . County Coroner, yes? You have an obligation to forward evidence of a misdeed to proper authorities. Is it wrong for me to do the same?" Dorian stared at her for a moment longer, then looked away. Leaning back against the couch, he said, "Excuse me, Dr. Lambert. As I said, I'm used to *asking* questions, not answering them. And you . . . I thought your specialty was physiology, not sociology or politics."

Natalie didn't dare say what she thought—that unless she found some way of getting around Nick's interview, a cure that might bring him back across would be problematical. "Just want to know where I stand."

"All right." Then, Dorian sat upright suddenly and looked to the hall door. "Did you hear something—just now?"

"No." Natalie listened carefully, then shook her head. "But as you just said, regarding physiology . . . I *wouldn't*."

"True." Dorian smiled softly, relaxing against the cushions, although his fingers drummed against his knee. "Our sensitive hearing does prove distracting in this modern world. You were saying?"

She hadn't been. And she wasn't certain she should. But, knowing this was the only time she was ever likely to get an answer to the question—"You know the history of vampires. Has anyone ever crossed *back*? Become mortal again?"

Dorian's eyes widened and he stared at her, his disbelief apparent. "Is *that* what the fool's up to?" His eyes narrowed. "But, you're not asking on Nick's behalf, of course."

The lie rose to her lips . . . and stopped, when she remembered Dorian's arm around her throat, his fangs on her neck. So far, she'd gotten by with evasion, but she hadn't tried to slip an out-and-out lie past him. She wasn't certain she could. Or that it was worth the risk.

Instead, Natalie picked up her coffee cup. The coffee was cold and growing bitter, as she reached the dregs, but she still drank. And, when Dorian realized she wasn't going to say anything else, he cleared his throat.

"I'm afraid I can't answer."

"Personal reasons, again?" she asked sharply.

"The Code. I *can* tell you that a number of us have tried that path over the centuries. I've been witness to some spectacular failures." Dorian's eyes were cold and dark and empty again. "Dr. Lambert, I should warn you off this path of inquiry. It's very dangerous—"

"You promised to answer me, honestly."

"Anything I *can*," he corrected. The dark eyes softened and he smiled. "You can only blame yourself if you ask questions I can't answer."

Natalie looked away, fighting back the angry words that rose to her lips. She'd been here less than an hour. There was another hour before sunset. If Dorian continued to be evasive, she wouldn't get any of the answers she needed, *Nick* needed. But those were the *hard*

questions . . . .

"Why have you come here, now?" she asked, after a second's pause.

Dorian tilted his head, expression wary. "To interview Nick. You know that."

"You've had eight hundred years to interview Nick," she countered, her frustration giving an edge to her voice. "Why *now*?"

He stared at her a moment, expression still wary. "You shouldn't take my presence as a personal affront or attack," he whispered, after a moment's pause. "I can promise you, I'll do everything in my power to protect you, and my power is considerable. In fact . . . perhaps, Dr. Lambert, it would be best if you left town, until this was over."

The words chilled her soul faster and more completely than the coldest of Toronto winter winds. She couldn't look away, lost in the dark gaze that was offering her no hope . . . for Nick. "Is it . . . it's going to be *that* bad?"

Dorian didn't answer at first. Rising from the couch, he walked around behind it. "If Nick had any sense, he would've sent you packing last night."

He'd ignored her question. Which told her more than any words. Natalie turned her body, following him with her eyes. "I wouldn't have gone," she answered, with no small amount of belligerence.

"He could've made you." Dorian glanced over his shoulder, meeting her eyes only briefly, before turning away. "*I* would have."

She was preparing an answer when he turned toward the door. This time, Natalie, too, heard the resounding crash and clatter of breaking glass. Saying, "What in Hades—?", Dorian was across the room and at the door before she rose from the couch.

Another crash came from behind her, at the far end of the living room, beyond the couch. The glass from the windows shattered inward, the force of the blast pulling the dark curtains from their pinnings and setting them flapping. Daylight flooded the small space and, among the sudden sunshine, smoke began to rise, like a mist, from the floor.

At first, she thought it was a fire. Dorian vaulted the couch, knocking over the coffee table in his haste to get to her. The carafe fell to the carpet, shattering along with the top of the glass table, turning the salmon carpet dark brown. Instinctively, Natalie clutched her purse tightly, as Dorian placed an arm against her back, his eyes moving to the window—though she couldn't tell if he'd seen a flash of something outside or was worried about the influx of the light, which nearly reached them. If he hadn't heard something at the hall door and moved to the other end of the room, he would have been caught in the sunlight.

Only seconds had passed since that first crash, but though the smoke continued to rise, there was no sign of flames, or heat. Then Dorian's hand, which had been supportive, was suddenly pressing down on her shoulder. Natalie grabbed hold of him as he doubled over in pain and began to cough, almost retching.

That's when she realized the smoke wasn't smoke—it was *gas. Garlic* gas.

Dorian was a dead weight against her, then he moved away, falling helplessly. Coughing, Natalie, grabbed at him, catching his shoulder and managing to duck beneath his arm. He was conscious enough to stumble with her, as she dragged him toward the hall. Once there, she let go of Dorian and opened the door, but was faced with more gas—the other crash they'd heard had been another smoke bomb, which had effectively cut off the rest of the house.

With a sudden burst of energy, Dorian ran into the gas-filled hallway, ignoring her as she cried out for him to stop. She reached him just as he opened the front door and was barely in time to push him to one side, as light, and fresh air, flooded in. But his flesh still sizzled—his hand had been on the edge of the door as it opened. Dorian fell back with a cry, hand clutched to his chest, choking on the garlic fumes. He fell to his knees, then to his hands, hiding in that small space of darkness beyond the door, effectively trapped.

The wind was blowing in the wrong direction, drawing the garlic gas out of the house, but not quickly enough. Natalie staggered out into the sunlight, coughing violently, eyes tearing. She'd seen the reaction Nick had to garlic, but she'd no idea if it could be fatal to vampires, in a sufficient dose.

Her first glance went to the cars in the driveway—the larger of the two was gone—presumably taken earlier by Vivian. She was pretty certain that Dorian wouldn't fit inside her trunk. And the other one looked too small. She didn't know how much longer he'd fight the urge to get away from the gas. He'd almost run into the light once. If he succeeded now, she wouldn't need a body bag to gather up what would be left of him. And . . . wouldn't that solve Nick's problem?

Dismissing the thought as uncharitable and inhumane, Natalie ran for her car, suddenly realizing that she might have an answer. Tossing her purse to the ground, she opened the driver's side door and hit the trunk release, then ran around the rear, to check her spare supplies. The police weren't the only public servants who could be called to an emergency from home. It just so happened she had a couple of spare body bags in with her emergency kit.

Shaking it out, Natalie unzipped one bag, then picked up the second and shook it to its full length, as well. The bags were supposed to be light-proof—colored silver on the outside and black on the inside—but she didn't dare take chances. Not with the life of a vampire on the line. The bags flapped behind her like pennants as she ran back up the gravel walk and to the front door of the small house.

Dorian was curled into a ball in the spot of darkness. The gas was rising, but wherever it came from must have been spewing forth more, because the gray smoke still

billowed out the door. After dashing in and making a quick assessment, Natalie was forced to step out into the light and take a deep breath.

Only then did she dare return to kneel down beside the vampire, the light shining on her back. At her touch, he snarled, straightening. Eyes flashed red and gold, even through the smoke, and his fangs were in place, all too sharp and lethal. But Natalie had dealt with live, wounded people at emergency situations before. She slapped his face, hard, to get his attention.

It worked. The eyes were still gold, the fangs still in place, but he was seeing her. Placing the doubled bags beside him, she rolled them to their full length. It was hard to talk, with the gas in her throat and those fangs so close, but she tried. "Dorian—listen. It's a—protective—bag. It'll stop—the sun."

The words were broken by choking and gasping. He seemed to understand, but resisted as she tried to roll him onto the bag. Natalie pushed at him, then placed the flat of the back of her hand against his cheek. Leaning down, her throat perilously close to his fangs, she said, "Dammit, *trust* me. Or you'll die!"

His hand grabbed her shoulder without warning, insistently. Natalie froze, afraid that she was going to feel those fangs bury themselves deep in her neck. And, she wondered what Nick would think, or if he'd even guess that she'd died trying to save a vampire who was probably going to kill him.

But Dorian shifted his weight, following the push of her hands. The bag was dangerously close to the sunlight and he snarled, but once she got him centered over the bag, it took only seconds for her hands to perform the actions that were second sense to her by now—pull up the edges, flip the flap, then zip up the length of the bag. The inner bag was first and she'd almost sealed it completely through habit, when a blackened finger appeared in the opening, stopping her. Muttering, "Sorry," between coughing fits, Natalie zipped up the second bag, sealing Dorian inside.

Natalie smiled grimly as she grabbed the handle at the head of the bag—'remember which end is the head' having been one of the ageless jokes throughout her medical schooling—and dragged Dorian into the sunlight. He wasn't a lightweight and she slipped on the gravel as she tugged the bag as slowly as she could onto the lawn—all she needed now was for the bag to rip, thank heavens she'd thought to use two!

Once outside, she dropped to her knees in the grass and flipped the bag over, zipper side down to the ground, reaching beneath to unzip it slightly. He'd continued coughing as she'd dragged him, but that seemed to have lessened. The shape in the bag shifted, he seemed to be trying to get his knees under him—but there wasn't much give in the bag and he might very well rip it open from the inside.

"Stay put," she warned him, placing a hand on what she guessed to be his back and exerting some small amount of pressure. Then her knees gave out and she fell on her rear, landing hard. For a long time, she sat there, coughing, staring up into the sunlight, and watching the gray smoke continue to pour out the front door of the house. What she needed was a drink—water would be great but alcohol would feel a whole lot better in the long run. All in all, she was fine. She hadn't been inside long enough to give her lungs more than a slight irritation. But Dorian—

Leaning down, she peered beneath the shadowy underside of the bag. "Are you—?"

"Amongst the . . . living?" Coughing accompanied the comment. "Yes. And very glad embarrassment isn't fatal to vampires."

"Maybe not, but it's hell on inflated egos."

There was another fit of coughing, followed by a weak. "Touche'." The silver bag twisted and she caught a gleam of an eye in the crack he'd opened in the bag. "Vivian isn't here. Dr. Lambert—I'm at your mercy."

She could strike a bargain—Dorian's life for Nick's? But Natalie shook her head, frowning at herself, knowing she'd lose her own soul in *that* bargain. The oaths she'd taken when she'd entered the field of medicine weren't meant to be discarded at the first opportunity, no matter how desperate the situation. "What can I do?"

"Get me to a . . . safe place," whispered Dorian. "Somewhere *dark*."

Rubbing the back of her neck with her hand, Natalie thought for a moment. Glancing over at the parking area, she said, "I'll bring my car around. There's no trunk space, but I'm sure there's some place nearby, a parking garage or something."

There was a muffled exclamation from inside the bag. "Good," said Dorian, after a pause. "Between the two of us, I should survive on your rear seat. I think a body bag as a passenger might attract attention."

"Yeah, you should see what happens when I take them to the laundry." Natalie got her knees under her, then wiped her grass-stained hands on her skirt, chalking off another good outfit. Why was it that since Nick had sat up on her dissection table, she'd had more work clothes torn, ripped, or stained than she'd gone through in the previous five years? Sighing, she looked down at the large silver bag and wondered at the sight they must make—a coroner and a corpse on the lawn, taking in the late afternoon sun. Definitely *not* your average Andrew Wyeth.

"I guess you're right," she admitted, after considering a moment more. "If we get pulled over, you're going to be tough enough to explain on the *back* seat." Her hands were on the ground, ready to propel her to her feet, when the sound of fire engine sirens reached her ears. And Natalie froze, her eyes moving from the silver bag to the house. "Dorian—is there something in there they shouldn't find?"

"Nothing incriminating," he said quickly. "I finished the blood from last night while we talked. My clothing—will be a loss. Vivian's put my papers in a safe place. Your

handbag?"

"By the car."

"Then go. I shouldn't think I'll be easier to explain on the lawn than on your back seat."

Natalie ran for the car, her shoes slipping on the loose gravel of the walk. Scooping up her shoulder bag, she threw it onto the passenger seat, then rescued her keys from her pocket and started the car. The trunk banged opened as she drove over the gravel walk and the lawn. There was no time to be careful with the grass and her tires left treads. A brief image passed through her thoughts—of Schanke, in a trenchcoat, examining her tires with a magnifying glass. Well, it wasn't like her prints weren't all over the living room, particularly that coffee mug. The worst they could tag her for was miscellaneous mischief and some property damage. She wondered if the ever-capable Vivian had thought to purchase rental insurance, which would seem a no-brainer if you were used to vampires She'd known two-year-olds who were less destructive.

Dorian hadn't moved. Pulling the car alongside the body bag, Natalie leaped out, but left the engine running and the car in park. She slammed the trunk closed on her way around the back of the car, then opened the rear passenger door. A second later, she was down on her knees beside the bag again. "Ready?"

"I don't suppose I have a choice."

"Then let's zip you up. Watch your nose." Reaching beneath the bag, which lifted upward for her, Natalie zipped the bag closed. "All right. I'll see if I can get you to your feet. Maybe we can hop you over to the car."

There was a muffled comment from inside the bag which she took as assent and a confirmation of the absurdity of the situation. Working carefully, she managed to get Dorian to his knees, then his feet. It was only a matter of five feet to the car, but their progress was slow, until the fire sirens sounded again . . . closer this time. Dorian suddenly seemed to master the art of hopping inside a body bag and she had to force down his head, as he all but threw himself into the back seat. Unfortunately, there was still about a foot of bag sticking outside the door and there wasn't time to walk around the other side, unlock the door, and pull him through.

"Pull in your feet," said Natalie, giving the bottom of the bag a slap. As soon as he complied, she slammed the rear door, then hurried to the driver's side. The wheels spun on the grass, giving her a bad moment, but then they caught and the car lurched forward. Natalie took her hand off the wheel to put her seatbelt in place.

"Continue on the road that brought you here," came the instructions, slightly muffled, from the back seat. "Go beyond the turn off. It'll take you in a circle, to the main road."

Natalie turned the car as instructed and they were soon under way. She continued to glance in the rear view mirror and was rewarded at one point, as they crested a hill, of the sight of a fire engine and car turning down the road they'd just left. "I think we're clear."

There was a moment of silence from the back seat, then she heard the zipper open further. "Dr. Lambert, I hope I can trust your discretion about this . . . situation?"

Her first words were bitten back—who the hell was she going to tell? But if Dorian still held Nick's life in his hands, she wasn't about to piss him off. "Sure."

"And, if I may ask, *where* are we going?"

Natalie stared at the road ahead, wondering that herself. At least one of Dorian's hands were burned, she'd have to look at it. Which meant access to water and some first aid supplies until his natural regeneration processes kicked in. He'd probably want to get to a phone, as well. "How about an underground mall? There's a parking garage—we could go straight into the mall without having to go outside. Some parts have skylights, but the majority of it should be safe enough."

"Yes. I've heard of it." His voice was still raw and he coughed for a moment. "I owe you a debt. If you hadn't been there, the attack might have succeeded."

For the first time, Natalie shivered, as she suddenly realized what had happened. She kept her eyes glued to the road, afraid she might swerve into another lane. Dorian was right—the garlic gas bombs were no accident. It was a deliberate attempt to destroy him. "But who—?" she asked aloud.

"Whoever knew I was there," came the response. "Vivian, of course, and the Enforcers—they always seem to know where I am, even when I take pains not to tell them. You. And . . . Nick." Dorian coughed again. "You didn't tell Nick you were coming to visit me, remember?"

Her fingers tightened on the steering wheel. Natalie dared a glimpse into the back seat, but all she could see was the lumpy silver body bag. "No. I didn't tell him."

"Ahhh," was the only reply, as the bag shifted. "As I thought."

"You can't tell me you think Nick—?"

"Why not? "

Again, Natalie bit back the first answer that rose to her lips. "You don't *know* him."

"I thought we'd established that I'd met him several centuries ago."

"That's not what I mean. And . . . he's got the same problem with daylight that you do. Or had you forgotten?"

The bag rustled in the back seat. "The gas is used as a non-toxic insecticide. It's readily available. And as you've demonstrated, there are ways around our shared . . . skin condition. I must remember to keep one of these things at hand—they're damned uncomfortable, but they work well enough." She glanced over her shoulder as the bag rustled again. "And I think you'd agree that he's in a position to find some mortal to do his day work for him."

"Because he's a cop?" asked Natalie, her eyes returning to the road. A shiver ran through her and she chided herself—Nick *couldn't* have done something like this. Could he?

"He's a detective. He probably has a string of informants. People like that are always willing to perform the odd service, for coin or consideration."

Natalie shivered again, hearing her words—spoken to Nick the night before—twisted out of context. "No," she said, with more confidence than she felt. "Nick wouldn't do something like this."

"You said the vampires fear me. Can you tell me, truthfully, that Nick *doesn't*?"

It was a question she couldn't answer. So she didn't. Biting her lip, Natalie guided the car down Younge Street, her thoughts caught in a turmoil.

But Dorian didn't press the point. "Is there a men's clothier in this mall of yours?"

The question was so innocuous, Natalie couldn't help but glance in the rearview mirror again, surprised. "Yes. I mean, there are a couple of different stores. What are you looking for?"

"Anything that doesn't smell like garlic."

As the bag shifted again, Natalie grimaced—now that he mentioned it, the interior of her car was staring to smell a bit iffy.

"And we'll purchase something for you, as well," added Dorian, as if reading her thoughts.

"That won't be necessary—"

"It certainly *will*. You saved my life and lost your suit in the process. It's the least I can do. Besides which . . . I'll need you to take me by Nick's, as soon as the sun sets. And I'd rather neither of us smelled like a Sicilian luncheonette."

A police cruiser sailed by them. Natalie kept her eyes on the road ahead, afraid she'd recognize the officers in the car as it passed. "Dorian, I . . . ."

"I'll ask you not to mention the matter to him. Our interview will be tomorrow—whatever questions I have for Nick can be asked there." She opened her mouth to say something, but Dorian continued. "I think you'd prefer that he not know you came to visit me today. If you keep my secret, I'll keep yours. Agreed?"

And although Natalie doubted, in her heart of hearts, that Nick could be capable of an act that was nothing less than attempted assassination, she agreed not to mention the attack. For what would Nick think, if he knew that she'd saved the life of a vampire who might be his mortal enemy? Would he forgive her?

Because, if Dorian did anything to harm Nick, Natalie knew she'd never forgive herself.

CHAPTER FIVE

NICK STRIPPED the black leather gloves from his hands and threw them onto the top of the piano. Passing them, he paused, then rested his hand on the sun warmed-leather. For a moment, he closed his eyes, trying to remember what the sunlight had been like, before it had become a symbol of destruction . . . and salvation. But the memory escaped him, as always. He had lost the light too many years ago, before the totality of every passing second had begun to be inscribed upon his heart.

As he walked into the darkened loft, the sunglasses followed—falling to a chair. The long sleeved coat was dropped over the back of the couch, a dark woolen scarf slipping from the collar and falling to the floor.

He didn't stop to pick it up, simply left it where it lay, as he headed toward the refrigerator. His brief trip into the light over, it was, as the saying went, 'Miller Time.' Although his particular brand of choice wasn't found on any supermarket shelves.

Pulling the half-empty bottle of blood from the refrigerator, Nick lifted the mouth of the bottle to his lips, then paused. Smiling, he lowered the bottle and walked over to the shelf above kitchen counter, where his wine glasses were stored. With a certain amount of pride at this display of self-control, he poured blood into the glass, stopping the flow when it reached the halfway point, as Natalie had instructed the night before.

Frowning slightly, Nick added just a bit more to the glass, before setting the bottle aside. He deserved a little self-congratulation. Lately, he'd begun to feel that his being a good cop was starting to depend too much on him being a healthy vampire. His little outing had just proven that he *could* perform in a mortal, daylight world. Raising the glass in a silent toast to himself, he was forced to admit that most mortals wouldn't have been dressed as heavily as he'd been, on a late spring afternoon. But it was all one step at a time, wasn't it? And Natalie would be pleased to hear that, for once, he'd taken the initiative.

The blood was gone too quickly. Walking into the living room, Nick sat down on the couch and contemplated the empty glass. The

hunger was put off, but barely, like a blanket of live coals banked in the evening. Come morning it would burn hot and bright within him. Once again, he'd go to sleep hungry. But he'd disappointed Natalie last night by breaking with her schedule and he'd go hungry as long as he could bear to win back her trust and approval.

Leaning against the black leather of the couch, he stared at the metal shades that protected him from the sunlight. In a little over an hour, he'd be free again to walk the night. Until then, he could turn on the television and watch a talk show, or even head upstairs and change into his clothing for work . . . but doing anything seemed too much of an effort. He'd grown used to waiting, over the centuries. And there had been so many things to wait for—a carriage or coach, the smile of a pretty debutante with a long white neck, the end of a battle or a war . . . but always, each day, he waited first and foremost for the setting of the sun.

Nicholas stalked the length of the wattle and daub structure. Nothing more than a hovel, it had become a cage for him. There were no bars, no iron, no chains, not even stone to contain his rage at inaction. Only the Enforcers stood silent sentinel. There was always a matched pair on hand, but never the same twice, who stood inside the door when the sun burned high and hot, then outside the door when the cool evening set in. For two days, through the rain and the mud, the Enforcers had kept watch over them.

And still . . . there was no sign of Dorian, or Janette.

"Oh, *do* sit down, Nicholas," growled LaCroix, from his seat by the fire. "The floor is only dirt beneath the thatch, you know. You've already worn a rut in the mat."

This time, he did not do as he was told, but walked to the stone half-moon hearth that held the fire and stared down at LaCroix. "Are we to do *nothing*?"

"We're doing something. We're waiting. And if you're going to survive past a century, it's something at which you should learn to excel." LaCroix's words were clipped. He poked at the last of the coals, stirring them into the heat of the remaining fire. "We could dice again."

Folding his arms, Nicholas turned his back to the fire and met the always-angry stare of an Enforcer. "You've won all my coin," he said bitterly. "What else would you have me wager?"

"That's true. Too much of you belongs to me and even I'm not yet bored enough to risk losing what I already own." Smiling and shaking his head, LaCroix turned back to poking at the coals idly. "The sun's barely set—they should be here soon. I can't see there being all that much to be discovered from Janette. And Dorian is a slave to the tradition of hospitality. He'll return before we've run out of coals, or he'll supply more. And prey. *That*—" LaCroix sent a burning coal spinning out of the fireplace, onto the worn thatch covering the cottage floor, "is when we start to worry."

Nicholas barely heard the words, concentrating on quickly stamping out the smoldering thatch, then kicking the coal back to the stone hearth. LaCroix simply sat back and watched his frantic movements, still smiling. "Take care—" warned Nicholas.

But he turned quickly when he heard movement outside the door. Only Dorian's black cloak was visible at first, as he ducked and pushed aside the blanket they'd been using to keep out the daylight. His eyes rested on Nicholas briefly, then drifted onto LaCroix. "I've brought back your prize lure, though I found it to be of little use, myself."

An Enforcer entered behind him, Janette in his arms. She seemed barely conscious, her eyelids closed. The vampire dropped her to the floor, where she remained, letting out a low moan.

Nicholas ran past Dorian and knelt, lifting her in his arms. Her dress was a ruin, torn and shredded, covered with dirt and blood—but whose he could not say. Only her cloak remained intact, and he wrapped that around her, for the sake of common decency. Stroking her tangled hair, he whispered her name.

Her eyelids flickered, then rose. The eyes that stared back at him showed no sign of life or recognition for a second. But then she was there, staring back at him. His heart leaped within him, to see that some part of her had not been harmed.

But, for his pains and his care, she looked past him quickly, turning in his arms to see LaCroix, her lips forming his name, but giving forth no sound or intelligible speech.

LaCroix, for his part, did no more than glance at her, then turned back to poking at the fire, seemingly disinterested in her welfare. "You're through with her?"

"Yes."

Only then did LaCroix look up, his eyes filled with challenge as he glared at Dorian. "And with *me*?"

"For now." Nicholas suddenly found himself the subject of Dorian's coal-black stare. "I'll return for your newest acquisition . . . in time."

LaCroix threw the poker to the floor, the clatter catching Dorian's attention. "It'll be centuries before his life is worth anything to you."

"Perhaps. But you should begin his education in earnest, LaCroix. Teach him not to lie to me. And remind him of it, often. It will go easier with him if he learns to tell me the truth, not what he thinks I would hear." A sharp smile crossed Dorian's lips, as he pointed at Janette, the pale, clean hand emerging from his cape. "Like *that* one."

Nicholas was surprised as a deep throated growl rose from Janette—he could feel the rumble of it beneath his hands as he held her. Then she spat, the spittle not quite reaching Dorian's boots.

That, at last, earned her LaCroix's attention, as well as an approving smile. His eyes were triumphant as he stared at Dorian. "You haven't destroyed her, despite your best efforts."

"There was no need," replied Dorian. His voice even, he showed no sign of annoyance or even anger at Janette's display, although he moved the toe of his boot enough to grind the spittle into what was left of the thatch mat. "She's been true to the Code. And to you."

"You expected less?" challenged LaCroix, still smiling.

Dorian turned away, the black cloak swirling around him like a cloud of darkness. "Until we meet again, LaCroix."

"May it be a millennium."

"Oh, not quite that long, I should think." He paused as he passed Nicholas, staring down, with a hint of a smile playing about the edges of his lips. "No. Not quite that long."

Without another word or backward glance, Dorian swept out of the hovel and into the darkness, the three Enforcers following, each silent. Nicholas almost rose to follow them, but whatever effort Janette had been expending to keep herself upright in his arms was finally exhausted. She fell back and it was only the speed of his reflexes that allowed him to catch her, before she fell to the dirty thatch matting.

Again, she seemed to have left herself, her eyes staring blankly upward. Nicholas cradled her head in his arms. "Janette? Can you speak? Were you . . . ill-used?"

Her eyelids flickered at the sound of his voice, then closed at his words. Moaning again, she curled herself into his cloak, hiding her face. "Yes," she muttered, her voice low and thin, muffled by the heavy cloth of his cloak. "Oh . . . yes."

Anger feeding the fire within him, Nicholas stared up at LaCroix. "You cannot tell me you'll not seek vengeance for this?" Instinctively, his free hand moved to the pommel of his sword, ready to rise and strike at LaCroix's command.

LaCroix gave no command, but stood, staring down at the remains of the fire, as it burned itself out. "Leave it, Nicholas. Chivalry is dead. And your devotion is tiresome."

Unable to believe his ears, Nicholas stared. "But . . . if we're not to avenge her honor—?"

"Honor?" A laugh rose from LaCroix's chest. He turned, gesturing down at Janette, whose only response was to shiver and burrow deeper against Nicholas' shoulder. "Janette? Shall I send Nicholas out to avenge your . . . honor?" When she gave no answer, he turned cold eyes to Nicholas. "*Chevalier*, her 'honor' was lost centuries before this. Unless you've found some magic or fancy that will carry you into the past, you're far too late to avenge *that* petty theft."

A small sob escaped her. Wrapping both of his arms around her, Nicholas whispered, "Janette—tell me to go and I shall. I'll tear his heart from his chest and make it a present to you. Only tell me that you wish it and it shall be done."

Her eyes appeared, small and dark, ringed with black, smeared coloring and bruises against the ivory pall of her skin, which was in turn surrounded by the thick warm brown of the cloak. Her fingers reached up to touch his lips, the nails cracked and broken. "Oh, Nicola . . . where have you been for all of these centuries?"

"Tell him, Janette," said LaCroix, still at the fire. "By all means, release him—I give you leave. Send this pup against Dorian and his hounds of hell."

Despite LaCroix's words, Janette's eyes had stayed with Nicholas, until he thought the blue within them would swallow what might be left of his soul. A bright fire burned suddenly in those depths and the fear erupted in her voice. "No! Nicola, you must *not* go, not for me. Don't face Dorian and his kind. Not for *me*."

Stroking her dark hair again, he held her close. "But his treatment of you cannot be allowed—"

"Tell him why Dorian took his time and his pleasure with you, foolish girl."

Janette started at LaCroix's voice, then turned to stare at him.

"It'll save him, in the end. Remember, Nicholas will have his time with Dorian, eventually."

Nicholas looked back at LaCroix. Despite his words, he seemed to be speaking plainly, the point of the barb directed more at himself than Janette. Then, as Janette shuddered again in Nicholas' arms, LaCroix added, "Tell him what you *did*, Janette."

Again she shuddered and Nicholas held her tightly. "You could do nothing to deserve such ill treatment," he said forcefully. "*Nothing!*"

"*Tell* him!" badgered LaCroix, and Janette twisted as if the words had been accompanied by a slap. "Or he'll lose himself in a rage on your behalf. If Nicholas goes after them, you'll lose him *now*."

Again, Nicholas dropped his hand to the pommel of his sword. LaCroix was right, the anger was building inside him. The frustration of waiting, or not knowing, of being held prisoner . . . and then this brutality visited upon Janette, *his* Janette, that was not to be avenged? He knew his eyes had taken on a golden cast and, carefully, began to pull away from Janette.

But she threw her arms around his neck, holding him. "No—Nicola, you *mustn't!*"

"*Tell* him!"

Those blue eyes met his own, the cold depths drawing off some of the heat of his anger. "I . . . spoke falsely," she admitted.

If anything, the words increased his fury. "And Dorian abused you for this? For a minor mistruth?"

"*No* mistruth is minor to Dorian." LaCroix's voice was quiet, but it sounded like thunder in the closeness of the hovel. Nicholas turned his head and LaCroix nodded. "He told you himself. He claims to be our historian, our *archivist*, so that our history, at least, won't disappear in some mortal conflagration or pestilence or argument over ownership of a fistful of dirt. Truth is *everything* to Dorian. He worships at her altar."

As LaCroix spoke, Nicholas began to feel the anger

drain from him. He didn't understand the meaning of the words as they were spoken, but it was as so many other things said by LaCroix in a serious tone—to be heard, fed upon, and digested later, in a quiet moment. If LaCroix said to accept what had been done to Janette then, for now, it must be accepted. But, in his heart, he made a vow that his reckoning with Dorian would come, in time. And *then* let LaCroix or anyone try to stay his hand.

Janette snuggled against him, burrowing beneath his cloak, enfolding him in her arms. Her lips were pressed against the skin at hollow of his neck, as she whispered, "I'm so hungry, Nicola. So very *hungry*."

"Yes." LaCroix walked over to him, towering above him, in the near dark of the cottage. "I'm tired of feeding off livestock. And unless she feeds well, we'll not make the next town by sunrise. Nicholas, since you're in a mood to draw blood, why not see if you can find a lone mortal to break Janette's fast? The rain's stopped—there may be one or two out by now."

Nicholas carefully set Janette back, seating her on the floor, then rose to his feet, facing LaCroix. "Yes," he agreed, after a second's pause. Then, as he turned, LaCroix put a hand on his shoulder, stopping him.

"Bring what you find back with you. We two will hunt along the way. I think we deserve a bit of sport, after this enforced captivity."

A wan smile rose to his lips, in echo of LaCroix's. He knew LaCroix's 'sport' would send them chasing over field and fen, seeing which of them could bring the prey to earth first. It would be good to run and fly, after staying so long in the hovel. There was no need for further agreement—the smile served. But . . . he paused at the door and turned, in time to see LaCroix bend to Janette.

LaCroix looked up, meeting his gaze. "What?"

"Dorian said . . . he will come for me?"

"He comes for all of our kind, in the end," answered LaCroix, voice heavy with sarcasm. "The grim reaper of our truths."

Nicholas licked his lips. "When?"

"Not for . . . some time."

"Then why warn me now?" He watched as LaCroix straightened, Janette leaning against his legs. "When he comes for me, you'll be there. And Janette."

"How do you know that?" Wearing a light smile, LaCroix reached down and took Janette's hand in his own, meeting her eyes. "Would you see into the future, as well as the past? Slow down, Nicholas. Take one step at a time. After all—" LaCroix looked up, arching an eyebrow, "it's a long walk, through eternity. The path can be treacherous. Who knows what could happen along the way?"

The words were a dismissal, when accompanied by LaCroix's eternal stare. Nicholas turned in the doorway, hearing their murmured voices behind him. But their words made no sense to him—his heart was afire with the fear of facing that foreboding eternity alone, as he walked into the darkness.

Recognizing the sound of the elevator, Nick started and was just in time to catch the glass in mid-air, as it tumbled from his fingers. Setting it down on the coffee table, he walked toward the elevator doors with a light step, preparing to give Natalie his good news.

But, when the doors opened, it was Vivian who stepped into the loft. Seeing him, she started, clutching a briefcase to her chest and uttering a light cry of surprise. "Nick! Hi!" Sheepishly, she looked down at the floor. "I'm sorry, I thought you'd be sleeping and I didn't want to disturb you. I have some forms for you to fill out."

"It's all right—I was up. I had . . . something to take care of." As Vivian struggled with first opening, then holding the briefcase, he asked, "May I?" When she smiled in assent, he took the case and placed it on the piano lid.

"Thanks." Vivian shifted through a number of folders in the briefcase before she seemed to find what she was looking for. With an apologetic grimace, she handed a file folder to Nick, then closed the case and slipped the lock shut.

The papers were forms, as she said, filled with question after question, each more mind-numbingly intricate and senseless than the previous one. "A questionnaire?" he asked, unable to keep the surprise from his voice.

Vivian shrugged, her sheepish smile returning. "Don't look at me like that—it wasn't *my* idea! Dorian has this thing about keeping up with the times. I never should have taken him to that mall in Detroit." Sighing, she gestured toward the paperwork. "Gee, that's the last thing I thought I'd grow up to be—a survey lady. But, I guess that's part of what I do."

He met her eyes. "And what is it that you do?"

She didn't look away, but he saw a shiver run through her. "You mean . . . what am I doing with Dorian?"

Gesturing toward the living room, he asked, "Would you like to sit down? We never did get to talk last night."

"I know." It was only then that she looked away, to the dining table, where he and Natalie and Dorian had met. "I have some things to do, but . . . maybe for a few minutes?"

Vivian seated herself on the couch. He sat beside her, finding himself welcomed by a shy smile. "I suppose," she said softly, "what you're really asking is why the career change from soap vixen to Archivist's apprentice?"

He wasn't quite fast enough to hide his astonishment at her words and saw it reflected in her expression. "I-I . . . hadn't even considered . . . ."

"It's what Dorian wants," she answered firmly, looking away.

"And what do *you* want?"

Her sigh came from the bottom of her soul. "I want . . . to wake up. I want to wake up and find out this whole thing has been a nightmare." The blue eyes fixed on him, suddenly. "I kind of walked into a . . . situation.

The Enforcers were there. So was Dorian. And . . . he saved me."

At first, the words didn't make sense. Nick stared at the metal shutters, knowing that his image of Dorian didn't include the vampire archivist 'saving' anyone—mortal or vampire. "From the Enforcers?"

"I was a witness. And, I guess, a celebrity. They wanted me . . .dead." He looked up at the sudden tremor of fear in her voice and found that she too, seemed to be seeing something far away. "Dorian told them he wanted me, that he needed help with his work and that I'd be perfect."

"He could have made you forget."

Vivian looked at him, eyes sad. "I know that . . . now. But he didn't tell me that at the time. He . . . wanted me. I've been his secretary for the last five years. My life, my family, my friends, the business . . . it's all gone." With a half-smile, she gave a dismissive shrug. "Not that the business end of it was going all that well. Like I said, the ingenue stuff was wearing thin."

"So, you gave up your life, to save your life?"

"It was *taken* from me!" protested Vivian. "And now—" she swallowed, "now he wants to take it for real. He wants to bring me across."

The controlled terror in her voice chilled his heart. Nick reached across the couch and took her hand in his. "And you don't want to turn? But, Dorian said last night—"

"He won't listen—says I've just got last minute jitters or something. Stage fright." Vivian squeezed his hand, a terrified smile on her face. "But that's what Dorian wants. How can I say no to him?"

He saw that she knew the answer—the hopeless look in her eyes gave it away. She wasn't bonded to Dorian, she didn't have to be. He had her completely within his control. "You can't," he whispered.

"I know." Her answer was just as soft. Vivian pulled her fingers away from his, then clasped her hands together. "I thought you'd understand *that* much. After all, when you sent Dr. Lambert over today—"

Nick straightened, staring at her. "What?"

"Yeah. She arrived, just before I left—Dorian had a few errands for me to run." When he stared at her, she added, in a comforting tone, "It happens all the time, Nick. It's nothing to be ashamed about. They're always trying to buy him off. I think that's why he does the pre-interviews. If Dorian sees something he likes, he makes a point of mentioning it. We usually get it by messenger the next morning." She shrugged. "Sometimes it's a painting, or a pot, or a piece of jewelry—"

"Natalie's a *human being*."

"Yeah. Them, too. It's to be expected, the way you treat us like toys, or pets, or something." As if embarrassed by the bitterness in her tone, Vivian cleared her throat. "I'm sorry. I guess when Natalie showed up, I was . . . disillusioned. The way Detective Schanke talked about you, what a good cop you were, what a good *person* you were—" The blue eyes moved back to him and he saw her hopes dashed in their depths. "I thought you might—you'd be able— But, you're really one of *them*, aren't you? Just like Dorian."

Before he could answer, her eyes focused elsewhere. "Forget it. It was a stupid thing for me to say."

"I'm *not* like Dorian. Believe me." Again, he reached across to take her hand. And some hope seemed to flicker in the eyes that turned to meet his. To be able to give her that much warmed his heart, made him feel that maybe he *could* stand against Dorian . . . and win.

But then he remembered Dorian's object lesson of the night before—and the warmth was stolen by a sudden fear for Natalie's safety. Releasing Vivian's hand, he rose from the couch and walked over to the fireplace. What the hell did Natalie think she was doing? She'd met Dorian, knew how dangerous he was— "She was there when you left?" he asked, leaning his arm against the stone fireplace. "How long ago?"

"An hour? Hour and a half, maybe?" Vivian shrugged again, glanced at him . . . then stared, as if suddenly understanding the cause of his agitation. "Nick—it's okay. *She's* okay. Dorian won't hurt her. He likes to *play* with us, but . . . nothing serious. At least, not in the past three years."

The words were meant to comfort him, assuage his fears. In fact, they did the opposite—he *knew* how vampires played with mortals. Stalking to the phone, he barked, "What's the number there?"

"There's no phone at the house. Dorian's got a cellular phone, but I can't give you *that* number."

For a moment, he simply stared at her. "Vivian, I'm a cop. I can *get* the number, given time."

Fear filled her eyes and she raised her clasped hands to her mouth. "He'd know," she whispered. "Dorian would *know*. He'd kill me for betraying him."

Some deeper, darker part of himself wanted to tell her that he'd kill her with his own hands if she didn't give him the number. But when he took a step toward her, she threw up a hand and turned her face into the couch, crying, "Don't hurt me, please! I can't tell you! I can't! He'd kill me! He'd kill me!"

Nick froze, looking away, to the elevator door. He took a breath, forcing back his fear for Natalie. It occurred to him that Dorian knew exactly what he was doing—he'd sent Vivian here, knowing that she'd mention Natalie's presence. And what was the Archivist's plan? Was he supposed to force her to give him the information? Was he supposed to fly into a rage and *kill* her?

The echo of her sobs in the loft brought him back to himself. Nick walked over to the couch and sat beside her. Placing his arm around Vivian—she shivered and shied away at first, but he persisted—he held her against his chest. If that was Dorian's plan, he'd underestimated just how much Nick had changed over the centuries.

"I won't hurt you," he promised, whispering in her ear, stroking her hair. He could feel the fear in her frail,

mortal body, her heart beating wildly against him. And he rejoiced in the fact that her fear elicited no hungry response from deep within, no need to kill or rend or tear or torment. Compassion filled him as he touched her chin with his finger, lifting her eyes to meet his. "I told you, I'm not like Dorian. I'm concerned about Natalie. *And* you. I can . . . I can protect you from Dorian."

Her blue eyes were filled with disbelief. But as she stared at him, he saw uncertainty there as well; in convincing himself he might just have convinced her. Her heart skipped a beat, the thundering sounds of panic slowing, as she reached up a hand to wipe the tears from her eyes. "It's not possible . . . ."

"I can find a place for you to hide, where he'd never find you." Vivian shook her head, her eyes darkening, unable to accept his words, but he persisted. "He'd *never* find you."

"Then you *don't* know him." Wrenching away, Vivian left the couch and stood with her back to him, her arms crossed over her chest. "No, it wouldn't work. He'd just kill you. That's what happened the last time. He'd kill you. And then he'd find me."

Nick followed her. He reached out a hand to touch her shoulder, then drew it back, as her uncertainty about his own abilities and her faith in Dorian's power began to shatter that sudden confidence he'd gained. "There are places you could go. You could start a new life."

He saw her hesitate, her head turning, slightly, considering his words. But then her back stiffened and she shook her head again, her hands rising to the corner of her eyes and roughly erasing the tracks of her tears. "The Enforcers are everywhere. They'd find me. They'd take me back to him." Vivian walked to the piano, where she'd left the briefcase and her purse. "This time he might just let them have me. But . . . thank you."

"Vivian . . . ."

She pressed the button on the elevator and the door slid open. Turning, she fixed him with a steady, hopeless gaze. "Tomorrow night. Dorian said the interview's tomorrow night. You'll be told when and where to go. Just . . . be there on time. And, please, *don't* lie to him." Vivian stepped into the elevator, but when the door started to close, stopped it with her hand. She swallowed, then added, "973-4712."

There was no time to answer, no time to thank her—Vivian turned away and the door closed behind her. Nick paused only for a second, wondering at her courage. Then he moved to the phone and began dialing.

It rang. And rang. And rang. A second and third attempt with redial, then dialing the number again proved useless. The sustained ringing twisted the knife in his heart.

There were other numbers he could try. There was no answer at Natalie's apartment. His luck changed when he called the Coroner's Office and the phone was answered on the second ring, "Toronto County Coroner?"

The voice wasn't familiar and gave him a moment's pause—best to make it sound official. "Yes, this is Detective Knight. I'd like to speak to Dr. Lambert?"

"I'm sorry, Detective, but she's not due in until—" a chair creaked and papers shuffled, "at least eight this evening. Is this in reference to a particular case? I see a notation that she's scheduled the Kenko autopsy first thing, and your name's here—"

"No. It's . . . all right. Just leave her a message—I'll be by to see her."

"Okay. I'll make sure she gets the message. 'Bye."

Resisting the urge the throw the phone across the room, he carefully replaced the receiver, then looked up at the closed shutters. There was only a half hour until the sun set. If he waited, he could fly there directly, avoiding mortal limitations like traffic.

Nick's gaze moved to the piano, to the black leather gloves he'd left there, then to the coat he'd draped over the back of the couch. Walking to the coat, he picked it up, holding it in his hands. He'd dared the rays of the sun once today. To do so twice would be foolish. There was no guarantee he wouldn't get stuck within a sea of traffic, unable to leave his car and take to the air when the sun finally set. There was no way of knowing which delay might prove worse—to wait for night or to brave the day.

But then . . . he had no way of knowing if he was already too late.

The sound of the cloth tearing in his hands was drowned out by his roar of anguish and indecision and hatred of Dorian, the Archivist of the Vampires.

CHAPTER SIX

Twilight had passed into darkness, as Natalie stopped the car at yet another traffic light. The red glared at her and she glared back. How odd it was to be doing something so utterly normal as obeying a traffic signal. Ever since Nick had entered her life, 'normal' had become a relative term. If someone had told her in med school that one day she'd spend a frustrating hour shopping in a mall with a very fussy vampire, she'd have gone straight to the Psychology Department and warned them that one of their test subjects had gotten loose.

She sneaked a look at Dorian, who had lowered the car window—the garlic fumes were still in evidence, despite their purchase of the best and biggest air-fresheners his money could buy. He held his hands lightly in his lap, the hasty bandages she'd used to cover the worst of the burns were masked by a pair of brown suede gloves. Natalie choked back a laugh, remembering the astonished look on the salesman's face, as Dorian had instructed him to remove the lamb's wool lining from the two hundred dollar gloves. The astonishment had turned to out-and-out shock—when the man didn't move fast enough, Dorian picked up the gloves, turned them inside out, and quickly snapped the stitching with one of the fingernails on his left hand, which hadn't been as badly burned.

The light changed and she pressed the gas pedal, following the flow of traffic. "How are your hands?"

Dorian started, then lifted his right gloved hand, as if inspecting it. "There's no pain, at least, none to speak of. They'll heal well enough once I've fed."

"Will you have to cancel the interview?"

When she glanced over, she saw him clench the gloved hand into a fist. "I usually don't need my hands to ask questions."

"But don't you take notes or something? Or does Vivian do that for you"

"No need. I remember everything. *Everything.*" He paused and leaned back against the seat with a sigh. "And there are no witnesses to the interviews. When it was necessary, the Enforcers were permitted to be present, but I always sent them away when I

felt they were no longer needed. Something like—the sanctity of the Christian confessional, I suppose. Or—"

"Doctor/patient confidentiality?"

"Exactly."

Natalie lightly bit her lip, choking back the questions she wanted answered. She had a feeling that Dorian wouldn't tell her whether the Enforcers would be 'necessary' this time. Or what that might mean for Nick.

In fact, she'd done everything she could to dissuade Dorian from seeing Nick. She'd watched the two last night—Dorian verbally feinting and parrying, Nick resisting his efforts to draw him out, into . . . a fight? And now that Dorian suspected that Nick was trying to kill him—"He's probably already left for work."

"Oh, is he punctual?" Dorian gave an approving nod. "I'm pleased to hear that. At least he has one worthy quality."

"Nick's got a lot of good qualities," protested Natalie, frowning and glaring briefly at Dorian, before her eyes went back to the road.

"You being the best among them." Dorian cleared his throat. "He'll be there. I called and told him I'd be dropping by, to tell Vivian to wait for me there, if she returned."

Surprised, Natalie dared another glance. "When was that?"

"While you were trying on that dress, I believe. It *does* become you. I commend your taste. And I do wish you'd let me pay for it."

She was used to this trick from Nick—changing the subject by using compliments. Briefly, Natalie wondered if that was the sort of thing they were taught when they were brought across—she'd love a look at the textbook for Vampire 101—or if it was a habit they picked up over time, in dealing with so many mortals through the centuries. At least he was being honest; the dress *did* look good, a stunning green and gold number that was just a shade too dressy for work. It wasn't something she'd have bought on her own—as evinced by the silent scream only she could hear as her credit card went through the machine. She'd headed for the bargain basement, but somehow Dorian had led her led her upstairs, to an expensive salon. There'd been no choice—she'd shopped where he'd indicated and bought the dress he wanted her to buy . . . although he kept offering to pay for it himself.

Again, she half-considered talking him up on his offer. She'd be down to skipping lunch for months and cutting back on Sidney's catnip to pay for the thing. But something about the way he'd managed to maneuver her into doing exactly what he wanted warned her to beware of vampires buying dresses . . . and the souls that lived in them. "No, thank you," said Natalie firmly.

"*Such* independence." She could hear the smile in his voice. "In the past, Dr. Lambert, the life of an independent woman depended much on her financial circumstances. If she were a princess, she could manipulate the crowned heads of Europe with a finger, as did Margaret of Valois. If she were a commoner, the best she could hope was to be widowed early and the worst might mean being burned as a witch. Or stoned." He looked out the window, thinking for a moment, then nodded, "Yes, I remember a stoning in Tilmun, if only because it happened in the evening. Mobs prefer light—they like to see the blood, the crushing marks of each stone. A young woman, little more than a child, was stoned because she refused to wed."

"The laws are a little more liberal in Canada," said Natalie. "When *was* this?"

For a moment, she actually thought Dorian was going to answer. But then he chuckled beneath his breath. "A *very* long time ago. I *will* have to watch my words with you." When she glanced at him, he was trying to adjust his tie, but the gloves were giving him a problem.

"Leave that. I'll fix it when we get out," she chided. Then, when he looked at her curiously, she stared pointedly at the road, feeling the warmth in her cheeks. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." He ran his hand along the lapel of his suit jacket—so close to the color of the suit he'd unceremoniously dumped in one of the mall trash cans that she wouldn't have been able to tell them apart. "I won't feel properly dressed until I can get to a tailor."

Used to Nick's preferences and his astounding lack of laundry—she had a sneaking suspicion he simply threw out most of his clothing when it got dirty and bought new—she stifled a laugh. Then again, it was tough explaining to a laundry why the bullet hole they reported in your jacket didn't match a bullet in *you*. "Let me guess—you don't buy off the rack?"

His look of mock horror made her laugh aloud. "I should say not! My measurements have been the same for—" Dorian shot her a quick look and sighed, "some time. But, of course, tailors never take your word for anything. And it's a real bother to have to change tailors every few decades, especially after you've found an exceptional one. I tried passing myself off as my own son once." He looked away, to the window. "He cared more for his questions than my continued custom. And with the Enforcers keeping close watch over me . . . it didn't end well."

He didn't offer more on the subject and Natalie knew enough not to press him. That was something else he shared with Nick—a talent for understatement. Knowing the details of a situation that didn't 'end well' might very well be worse than watching one of those Argento films Nick had in his video collection. As it was, his words had twisted a knot in her stomach.

"I suppose I'll have Vivian pick up the rest of my purchases when she gets a free moment," continued Dorian. She saw him reach into his coat pocket, then frown. "Forgot. I left my phone at the house. Getting too dependent on technology, I suppose. I'll have Vivian see if it's possible to retrieve it. *And* arrange for a new rental car, something with sufficient trunk space and tinted windows, this time."

"I'm surprised you didn't get something like that in the first place."

"I'm afraid I've been thinking more of comfort than protection in the last decade. I've grown complacent. After all, it's been at least a century since someone tried to assassinate me."

Natalie winced at the word, which was linked in her mind with the phrase 'lone gunman' and, more lately, 'Oliver Stone.' Watching *JFK* with Nick hadn't helped any—he'd laughed uproariously through most of the picture when they'd watched it on video and only stopped after she threatened to turn off the tape and leave. But she'd still caught him chuckling to himself, when he thought she wasn't watching.

Which brought her back to her current dilemma. "I'm sure Nick had *nothing* to do with it."

But Dorian didn't answer, turning his attention back to the window. After a moment's pause, he said, "I hope this detour won't make you late for work."

Another evasion. But she didn't feel much like pointing it out to him. "No. I'm not due in until eight."

"But surely you've missed your dinner?"

"Grace and I'll do take-out from work," she answered, making a mental note. "The only one I'm putting off is Sidney . . . and he can stand to lose a half pound as it is."

"A . . . child?"

"Sort of." Natalie smiled to herself at the description. "A cat."

"Ah." Dorian chuckled. "I'd put even money on the fact that he doesn't get along with Nick."

When she turned to stare at him, she saw that he was smiling. "They're not overly fond of us. Predators don't like to share territory."

Natalie was just as glad they'd reached Nick's apartment—she wasn't sure she liked the mental image Dorian had just given her to mull over. She turned off the engine and unbuckled the seatbelt, then reached over to hit the seatbelt release on Dorian's catch—the gloves were giving him difficulty. By the time she'd gotten out of the car, he was already at the door, punching in the keycode.

Seeing him hit the correct numbers gave Natalie pause—but then, she'd arrived in the middle of the party last night. Nick might have given him the numbers. And she didn't doubt Dorian had his own sources of information which, from what she'd seen, might prove to be formidable.

But the door didn't open. Turning, Dorian smiled at her.

"What?"

"He's changed it. As if that would matter?" Chuckling under his breath, he looked up to the loft. The metal shades had been lifted and light was shining out through the open windows. "How like his master—every opportunity for some minor bit of defiance! But not enough like LaCroix for it to matter, in the long run." As Natalie stared at him, he gestured toward her car. "I'll buzz Nick—did you notice if I left my wallet on the dashboard?"

She paused a second, then shrugged. "It's okay. I'll get it." Natalie walked back to the car, unlocking the passenger door, then flipping on the overhead light. There was no wallet on the seat or the dashboard or—she clicked the lock—in the glove compartment. She was just about to check the floor of the car when she froze, suddenly realizing that Dorian had sent her on a wild goose chase.

Slamming the car door, she walked back to him, but the elevator door was already open. A glance up at the video camera told her all that she needed to know—Dorian didn't want Nick to know that she was here, with him. He wouldn't be able to see her car from the window, where she'd parked.

Natalie glared at Dorian as she walked into the elevator and he released the button that held the door open for her. "That was a shitty thing to do."

"I like to have the element of surprise on my side. It's kept me alive these many centuries."

"But . . . ." Natalie was about to accuse him of having lied to her, then went over his words. All Dorian had done was ask if she'd noticed if he'd left his wallet on the dashboard. She'd been the one to assume that he had and had offered to fetch it.

Dorian's eyes were on her, watching. "Yes, you see. I didn't have to lie. The truth, and silence, leave us options with which we can protect ourselves." A slight smile was on his lips as he added, "He's really not worth all of your effort, Dr. Lambert."

"That's for me to decide."

As the door opened, Natalie heard Nick's voice—he was standing with his back to them, talking on the phone. "—Car trouble. I'll be a little late. No—don't *cover* for me. Just tell the Captain, okay?"

Natalie glanced at Dorian, who was frowning. That was when Nick turned, hanging up the phone. His eyes hardened as he nodded to Dorian. But . . . his astonishment was evident when he saw her. Natalie couldn't immediately identify the look that flashed across his features, but her heart leaped within her—until a blank mask fell into place.

"Your call surprised me," he told Dorian, walking toward them. "Vivian said the interview was tomorrow."

"It is." Dorian hesitated, touching a pile of paper that sat on the piano. Gesturing toward Natalie, he added, "Dr. Lambert offered to drop me off on her way to work. I've had car trouble of my own, this evening. If I may use your phone?"

Nick waved toward the telephone, then, as Dorian moved away, he met Natalie's eyes. There was no more then three yards between him, but she felt like he was suddenly miles away. "So, how was your day? *Uneventful?*"

Never before had Natalie felt so ill-at-ease at Nick's loft . . . well, there *was* that one time, when she'd first met Janette. "I wouldn't say that." She glanced away from him, her eyes drifting past the piano, then pausing, as she spotted his black leather gloves. Picking them up, she looked again, seeing his coat, scarf, and sunglasses

scattered around the room. Nick had this thing about putting stuff away. That his protective 'day gear' was out meant that he'd used it.

There was a cold spot in her heart as she realized that he could very well have gone out to Dorian's house and thrown the bombs. If he had, he'd probably seen her car there. Which meant that he knew she'd gone to Dorian's, despite what his warning from the night before.

Nick was suddenly at her side and she gasped aloud as he took the gloves from her hands. "I guess there's something we should talk about," he said softly.

Her eyes focused on the gloves, then moved up to his face. But there was something hard in his expression . . . it sent a shiver through her. "Definitely," she answered, putting as much steel as she could in her voice.

For a moment, she saw his mask slip, seeing the fear of betrayal in his eyes. But he glanced up at Dorian. And when his gaze returned to her, that hardness returned with it. "Later," he promised. "I'll drop by the lab."

He walked away. Clearing her throat, Natalie fell into a professional tone of voice. "You'll want the Kenko results. It's number one on tonight's agenda."

"I know."

Nick's answer was flat, final, and *certain*. Natalie followed him. "Are you checking up on me?" she asked, in an angry whisper.

"Why? Do I have a reason to?" His eyes widened as he walked around her, suddenly noticing the dress. "That's new. And nice." Then he leaned close, sniffing at her hair, startling her so that she jumped back. "But you shouldn't eat Italian if you're going to hang out with Dorian. It's kind of a 'thing' we have."

Natalie stared up at him, not bothering to hide her own hurt. "We were *not* 'hanging out,' she answered sharply. "We went to a mall—"

"A mall?" Nick's eyes widened and the sharp edge of his smile made her shiver. "I'd always heard Dorian had a reputation for being able to show a girl a good time. Did he buy that for you, then? And what happened to what you were wearing before?"

She wanted very much to slap him. But there was also something in her brain that reminded her of that wounded look he'd had, before the mask had slipped back into place. One of them had to be adult about this . . . . Swallowing, she met his gaze, unable to hide the sadness and hurt in her own eyes and not caring if he drew pleasure from seeing that he'd wounded her. "Nick, I don't know what you—"

Simultaneously, he began, "Do you have any idea how worr—"

The receiver was dropped into the cradle with a needlessly resounding 'thud.' They both looked up as Dorian turned to them. "Thank you, Nick. As usual, Vivian's proven to be most capable. She anticipated my request—it seems she's had an appropriate vehicle left at Jarvis and . . . Suffolk."

Nick glanced down at Natalie, then back at Dorian. "That's on my way. I'll take you."

Natalie sighed inwardly, having found that brief look encouraging—there'd be a chance to clear the air later if Nick dropped by the lab, as he'd promised.

"Thank you, but Dr. Lambert's already offered." Dorian's eyes narrowed and a sharp smile crossed his face as he added, "I shouldn't want you to risk it, since you're having car trouble of your own."

That's when Nick stared at her again. Looking in his eyes, she felt herself sliding back across all of the ground she'd gained in the last few seconds, and then even more, so that more than miles now separated them.

"I'm sorry to have disturbed your evening," said Dorian, his voice anything but apologetic. "I know you must have been getting ready for your shift."

"Not at all. I was just about to grab a quick drink before I left." As she watched, Nick walked over to the refrigerator and pulled out an open bottle. He had a slight smile on his face as he gestured toward her. "I know Natalie doesn't indulge. You?" he asked Dorian.

Dorian winced. "Not if it's cow. But thank you, anyway."

"Specialty of the house." Nick lifted back the bottle and drank.

It was like watching a road accident—Natalie wanted to look away, but couldn't. Nor could she stop that small sound of dismay from escaping her throat. Last night, he'd promised to drink no more than half a glass—three ounces at the most. When he'd finished . . . well, she didn't need the augmented vision of a vampire to see that the bottle was nearly down to the dregs.

Nick met her gaze defiantly as he replaced the bottle in the refrigerator and slammed the door. "Why don't I walk you out?"

"Yes, we should be going. I don't want to delay Dr. Lambert more than necessary." Dorian offered her his arm.

Natalie paused, then met Nick's hard eyes. Chin lifting slightly, she smiled at Dorian and looped her arm through his. "We've got plenty of time. We can even swing around the park first, if you'd like. I don't suppose you've gotten to see much of Toronto."

It was a stupid thing to do and Natalie knew it before she even made the offer, before she took his arm. But Nick had hurt her, deliberately hurt her. And there was something in her mortal pride that wanted and needed to hurt him back.

Dorian smiled at her suggestion. "Thank you—I *would* like to see some of the city."

Nick stalked past them, grabbing his leather jacket from a chair on the way. Before they'd reached the elevator, he'd pressed the button, then stared at her with angry eyes. "I'll need that autopsy report. Tonight."

"And you'll get it. Tonight."

"Surely you don't rely on Dr. Lambert to solve your cases for you?" asked Dorian, in mock amazement. "Or . . . is she the real reason for your phenomenal

success?"

Nick opened his mouth, then closed it, looking away. Feeling that she had to intervene, Natalie said quickly, "No. I do my job. And if I find something that'll support a case Nick and Schanke have built, or can put them on the right trail, so much the better."

Natalie willed Nick to look at her, but he simply stared at the door. Dorian, however, smiled. "Ah, such modesty. Detective Schanke spoke highly of you, Dr. Lambert. He seemed to think you work too hard. In fact—" He looked at Nick. "I hope my presence hadn't upset your plans for this weekend. Detective Schanke said something about some gala event?"

His eyes remaining focused on the door when it opened, Nick said coldly, "I think I should wait until *after* the interview before I make any plans."

"Oh, I disagree. Strongly."

Dorian and Nick stood to one side; waiting as she entered the elevator. As it was, Natalie was sandwiched between them. And never before had she felt so uncomfortable standing beside Nick. Even when he'd fallen off the wagon, when she'd been afraid of him . . . but it wasn't like *this*. Almost as if he'd shut her out of his mind, his life, his heart.

"We should always have something to look forward to," continued Dorian, during the ride down to the street level. "Something to live for. We often forget that." He smiled down at Natalie. "If I were planning to stay, I might ask Dr. Lambert, myself. But I'm afraid I'd be broken-hearted when she declined the invitation—surely, Nick's stolen the honor of escorting you?"

The door opened as the elevator stopped. Again, they stood to the side while she exited. Nick looked down at her as she passed, but Natalie refused to meet his eyes, stating flatly, "I haven't been asked."

Nick followed her out of the elevator, but Dorian was there also. "Haven't been asked?" he echoed, glancing at Nick.

If looks alone could have killed, Natalie knew that the look Nick gave Dorian would have disintegrated him. "I've been busy," snarled Nick. "Things have . . . come up."

Dorian stopped when he reached the passenger side of her car, then turned to face Nick. "That's a poor way to phrase an invitation, Nicholas. I was hoping you'd managed to acquire some civility this past half-millenium. I know LaCroix traveled in the best circles, when possible. Still, if that's all that can expected of you—"

Natalie barely heard their words, as she walked to the driver's side door, her heart like a lead weight in her chest.

"Dr. Lambert?"

She looked up over the roof of the car, at Dorian's voice. "What?"

"You should at least give him an answer, shouldn't you?" He nodded back over his shoulder, toward where Nick was standing. "The condemned man, and all that?"

Natalie met Dorian's gaze, his words sending a chill through her. She had no idea how lightly he meant them. Then she looked to Nick. He met her eyes evenly, but there was no light there, no life. Very much . . . very much like when she'd first met him. But worse. "I . . . didn't hear a question," she said, softly.

She thought she saw a flicker of light in his eyes, but it disappeared almost immediately. "Would you . . . would you like to go to the Solicitor General's Dinner-Dance?"

Nick's tone was almost belligerent. Yesterday, at this time, she would have been thrilled to hear those words from his lips. But now . . . . "I—I don't know." Instantly, she regretted the words, when he turned away. "Later, Nick. All right? We'll talk about it later. Nick?"

But he had walked to the opening garage door, ducked his head, and disappeared inside the garage.

Fuming, Natalie opened the driver's side door, slipped into her seat, then reached over and slapped Dorian hard, in the chest. "You *bastard*. That was a *great* way for you to pay me back for saving your life."

"I thought that's what I was doing," countered Dorian, staring at her with carefully innocent eyes. "I finally forced the poor boor into inviting you—something that Detective Schanke seemed to have found impossible." Then, Dorian hesitated. "You *did* want him to ask you?"

Natalie's eyes were fixed on the garage door, as Nick's '62 Cadillac screamed out of the garage, then sped away, taking what was left of her heart with it. "I don't know." After a few moments of silence, she glanced over at Dorian and offered him a sad smile. "I'm sorry."

"For what? For telling me the truth? *Never* be afraid to tell me the truth." Clearing his throat, Dorian looked out the window. "It's I who should apologize. I made an assumption about your relationship with Nick. I was . . . in error."

"I think we *both* were," seconded Natalie softly.

"I think you need cheering up. Is it too late to take that promised drive around the park?"

Turning the key in the ignition, Natalie shook her head—there was that shift of subject again. But he was right, she needed something to get her mind off Nick for the moment. "We've got time."

"Good. Vivian's sole idea of sightseeing involves shopping. And daytime attractions aren't within the realm of possibility. Then again, I was familiar with most of the palaces and cathedrals of Europe when they still served the purpose for which they were intended. Museums are . . . too filled with memories." He turned weary eyes to her. "But that's something you wouldn't understand."

"Maybe." Natalie looked up at the signs through the windshield and aimed the car for Nathan Phillips Park. "I guess I'd feel a little strange seeing somebody I worked for or with, wrapped up in bandages and on display."

"Precisely. That horrible Ramses exhibition . . . ." Then he gave her a quick glance. "I just dated myself, didn't I?"

"It's a clue," admitted Natalie, trying to hide her grin. "But we're still dealing with a broad range."

Dorian looked out the window, his tone of voice containing a certain amount of relief. "That's true. I must remember to take more care."

"I guess you aren't used to paying much attention to mortals."

"More than most of my kind. I spend so much time with vampires, I find mortals refreshing. I . . . respect mortality. It takes a certain amount of courage to attend to mindless, mundane tasks, when you know the hourglass is running."

"Thanks for reminding me."

Dorian started, but she flashed him a quick smile, letting him know she'd taken no offense. "Seriously," he said, "*we* have time to better ourselves, erase our flaws. And so few of us do."

"And you've tried?"

She almost thought he wasn't going to answer. Dorian sat back in the seat. "That's personal—but, yes! I *have* tried. And succeeded, in some aspects. Others?" He shrugged. "Change is always an act of destruction—erasing the old to bring in the new. And so much about us must be false, for our own protection. That's why the truth is so important. If we can't be true to the mortal world, why shouldn't we be true with our own kind?"

Natalie bit down on her lip, thinking of Nick. He'd trusted her with so much information about himself and his kind. She'd still resented what he'd kept from her—things like Dorian and the Code—which he claimed to have done for her own protection. But it was also to protect himself. "Some of you *are* true with the mortal world."

"Parts of it," corrected Dorian quickly. "Exceptions are rare. Like you."

She felt his eyes on her, but refused to look at him, still seeing that betrayed look on Nick's face, in the loft. When things got tough, he seemed to retreat too quickly behind that 'but I'm a vampire' shell. What Dorian had said about truth struck a chord—Nick had to learn to be honest with her, and himself, if he ever hoped to cross back into the mortal world. Tonight, when he dropped by the lab—

"What's that?" asked Dorian, pointing to a building on her left.

Natalie shook herself out of her reverie and slowed. "That's the old city hall. The new city hall is just past here . . . ."

They spent an hour driving more or less in circles, sightseeing from the car. Dorian seemed to have an affinity for architecture, constantly commenting on this building and that throughout the centuries. She soon lost track of his comments about various historical periods and any hope of dating him by his words fell quickly by the wayside. His questions about the when and where and why kept her occupied—there was no chance for her to think about Nick. It was only when she looked down at the clock that she noticed how late it was.

"Dorian—would you mind if I dropped you off?" In answer to his questioning glance, she indicated the clock on the dashboard.

"Oh, not at all. I wouldn't want to impose upon your work schedule. Is it nearby?"

"Just around the corner, actually." Natalie turned the corner, then spotted a convenience store halfway down the street. A darkened car stood at the curb, just beyond the store parking lot. "Is that it?"

"Probably. It matches Vivian's description. And—yes—that's the license tag." As Natalie pulled her car in front of his, against the curb, he began to struggle with the seat belt. "She wanted to stay with it, but there was just too much for her to do tonight. Like finding new quarters, among other things. I very much doubt the house I rented will be habitable by humans, never mind vampires, until it's fumigated."

Turning the ignition key, Natalie smiled at his frustration, then lightly slapped his gloved hand away and undid the belt clasp.

"Thank you." Opening the car door, Dorian slipped out from under the belt with an obvious air of relief. "Never had that problem with carriages."

"I'll wait until you get the car started," promised Natalie.

He leaned on the door and shook his head. "There's no need—"

"What happens if the engine doesn't work and Vivian can't get out here? You *could* call a taxi."

"You forget." Dorian smiled, his white teeth gleaming in the darkness. "I could always fly . . . ."

"And get hopelessly lost. You don't know this city."

That seemed to decide him. "All right, then." Dorian closed the passenger side door as Natalie opened her own door. He walked around the rear of the car, meeting her on the driver's side. "Thank you for the sightseeing trip. That was an unexpected and welcome kindness. I owe you."

Standing at the driver's side of the rented car, Natalie took a deep breath. "You *can* pay me back."

"Dinner?"

"Don't make Nick go through with the interview."

Dorian looked away and leaned back against the car. "I can't do that. Not even for you."

"Then . . . delay it."

"Impossible." He shook his head, then met her eyes. "My authority is based on the Enforcers and what can best be described as tradition. To remove either would undermine my position. They'd lie to me. And I wouldn't get the true histories."

Natalie didn't care about the true histories, all she cared about was Nick. "Would that be so bad?" she asked.

"I'm the only one who knows." Sighing, Dorian looked into the distance. "This afternoon, you asked me if anyone's ever come back across. I can't answer you . . . but I do *have* an answer. I know with *certitude* that answer

is correct." Straightening, he placed one of his gloved hands against the car door and met her challenging gaze. "Would you ask me to settle for less?"

"I don't know. It depends on what your answer is to that question about coming back across."

His smile was filled with understanding. "No. I can't tell you. And I can't change the interview. Or dismiss it." Dorian bent down and reached beneath the car, withdrawing a key attached to a magnet. "Magnets are such clever things, don't you think? We have your kind to thank for that."

"Us?"

"Mortals. We don't invent things, as a rule." Smiling, Dorian tossed the key into the air, catching it in his gloved hand. "In general, mortals invent to make their mark on history, or to make their short lives easier. We have eternity. And we take our time." His fist closed over the key. "For the record, I think electricity was an outstanding discovery. And that moon-walking business . . . extraordinary."

Natalie hid a smile, not certain whether his last comment referred to dancing or space exploration. "On behalf of humanity, I thank you."

"You're quite welcome. Just . . . keep up the good work." Dorian placed the key in the lock. Once the door was opened, he stared down at the seat in dismay. "Damn—she's adjusted the seat again." Leaning inside, he felt around for the seat-adjustment lever.

"Here," said Natalie, pushing him aside as his gloves seemed incapable of handling the task. "Let me." Sitting in the driver's seat, she leaned forward, trying to find the catch.

"I must remember to put a height requirement in the prospectus, next time I have to fill a secretarial position," said Dorian, his annoyance obvious in his tone.

"Uh—there it is," said Natalie. Folding her hand around the catch, she pulled on it. "That's right—you said Vivian wants to be brought across—" The catch snapped. Natalie pushed back on the seat and it gave, until it clicked in place again. "There. I think that's got it."

Dimly, she registered the sound of a louder, metallic click, and a snarl. Dorian's eyes flashed gold and he pushed her flat, so that she fell across the gearshift and into the other seat. Startled, she started to yell—then a pointed piece of wood erupted from the right side of the driver's seat with a clunk.

For a moment, she simply stared at the foot-long wooden spike. Had she, or Dorian, been sitting on that seat when it was moved back into position, it would have been driven straight through the chest . . . and the heart. Vampire or human, it was a deadly device.

"What—?" she managed, still trying to catch her breath.

In response, Dorian grabbed her legs and started to drag her from the car. Instinctively, Natalie grabbed the passenger door handle and kicked at him. "Stop!"

"Fire!" he snarled, eyes still gold and fangs extended. "The stake might have been enough, but if he wanted to make certain, he would have rigged the car to explode."

Dorian made sense. Kicking him away, Natalie scrambled out from beneath that spike and to safety. She hit the ground outside the car, but Dorian lifted her to her feet, his arm around her, holding her close. He backed away a step or two, then seemed to relax. When she looked up at him, his eyes were dark again. His expression remained grim.

"It's a variation of the crossbow trigger," he explained, starring at the open car door. "But he took a risk this time. That might not have killed me. I'd only be wounded. And a wounded vampire is dangerous." Dorian looked down at her. "Remember that, Mouse-Mouse. When you play with cats, kill with the first blow. You won't live long enough to have a second chance."

Natalie stared at him, disengaging his arm from around her. "What did you call me?"

"Hmn?" Dorian started, glanced down at her, then back at the car. "Oh, 'Mouse-Mouse'. It's from a German nursery rhyme, about a baby mouse who sits on a windowsill and calls to the garden cats to come and play with her. They talk her into jumping from the ledge and joining them in the garden. Which she does." Sighing, he started back toward the car. "It seems safe enough. *I'd* have rigged it to detonate just after the stake cut through. Sloppy work. Or perhaps . . . not enough time to finish the job properly?"

As Natalie trailed after him, he added, "Stay close. That's twice you've saved me. You're my good luck charm."

Staring at the sharp point of the stake, she shivered. "I don't *feel* lucky." When she reached forward to touch it, his hand shot out, catching her wrist.

"No!" He released her quickly, then put his hand up, indicating that she should back away. "I'm going to close the door."

Natalie didn't need to be told twice. She took a few more steps back and Dorian closed the door. But then she felt foolish when nothing happened. "What will you do?"

Dorian looked down at the car. "Call Vivian and have her contact the rental agency. We'll tell them it's been vandalized. Which is a pity, because the trunk looks to be of a good size and the amount of tinting on these windows seems just beyond the legal limit. It's covered by insurance, I don't doubt." Then, he turned back to her and she saw a golden glow in his eyes. "I think it's time I confronted Nicholas about this foolishness."

"No," said Natalie firmly, meeting those eyes and hoping that a skip of fear in her heartbeat wouldn't betray her.

"You could have been killed."

"He was going to work." She took a step closer to Dorian. "He couldn't have done this."

"He knew where the car was—I made no secret of that. He even said it was on his way, asked to drop me

off." Dorian turned his head away. "He might have planned to use that stake on me. But since we took our time . . . ."

"Not enough time to do *this*."

Dorian glanced back at her, his eyes dark again, then at the car. "You're wrong, there. As I said, It's a simple enough trap, made even simpler by the rubber band—another marvelous invention, by the way. You forget, Dr. Lambert, your Nick was a knight. In effect, a soldier, a warrior. After all these centuries, he knows more ways to kill than you could count stars in the sky on a clear night."

"I don't deny that," she said softly, her fear easing now that the gold was gone. "I just don't think he's capable of something like this."

"And you know him *that* well?"

"I . . . thought I did."

Dorian took a step toward her, pointing with his finger to one side. "Tell me that he wasn't in the sun, today. I saw the gloves, the protective gear—"

"He's had to do it before," she countered. "Nick's a police detective. That means he's on call if they need him. He has to question witnesses, give evidence in court . . . it could have been any one of a half-dozen things. I—I don't know why he had to go today."

She could see the anger in his eyes, in the curl of his lip . . . as well as his frustration with her. Dorian put his hands on his hips, turned away from her, then turned back. "You doubt him yourself, but *still* protest his innocence. Admirable, Dr. Lambert, but don't let him drag you down with him. False hearts desire nothing more than to corrupt and devour the true."

Stepping forward, Natalie took his hand in hers. "Dorian—the interview's tomorrow night. Let me talk to Nick tonight."

He looked down at their hands. "I'd rather you stayed away from him. Far away. I can't protect you."

"I'll deal with that when the time comes," said Natalie flatly, fighting back the inner tremor caused by the implications of his statement.

But Dorian's eyes were sad, as he met hers. "No. I mean . . . I can't protect you from Nick."

Stunned, Natalie stared at him. "He'd never hurt me."

Pulling his hand from hers, Dorian pointed toward his car. "Are you so certain?"

She wanted to answer 'yes,' to scream it until it echoed in the empty street. But the word wouldn't pass her lips. Instead, she remembered the time he'd last felt betrayed, when he'd joined the twelve step program. In the back room of the Raven, he'd stood behind her, scaring her, enjoying her fear. All the warnings he'd ever given her had come so close to being true that night. He'd pushed her and pushed her, as if he *wanted* her to give up, to abandon him as lost, as too dangerous to help. She'd been terrified . . . but she'd stayed. And he'd come back.

"You said you owe me something," she said, meeting Dorian's dark gaze. "Give me this—let me talk to him. I can find out what's going on. If you confront him now, you won't avoid bloodshed." He turned his head away at her words and she added, "For my sake, let me try."

The silence between them seemed to last an eternity. Finally, Dorian looked down. "All right. For your sake." Then he looked over his shoulder, at the car. "Well, I still need a lift. Are you willing to chauffeur me a little farther, Dr. Good Luck Charm? Perhaps I could go to work with you—I could use the phone there to contact Vivian and let her know what's happened. Warn her to be careful." With a sigh, he said, "I should send her away. She's much too vulnerable here. It wouldn't be the first time someone's tried to take their vengeance by harming one of my secretaries."

"But . . . where will you go?"

She surprised herself at the amount of concern in her voice, and found that surprise echoed in Dorian's uncertain gaze. "I'll make my own arrangements for daylight accommodations. And I'll tell no one. Not even you."

"Nick wouldn't ask—" she protested. Not knowing whether Dorian would be safe during tomorrow's daylight hours seemed to make her uneasy, for some reason.

With a grim smile, Dorian placed a hand on her shoulder and led her to her car. "But Nick might try to take the information from you. Desperate times call for desperate measures. He hasn't lived this long without sacrificing bits of his honor to ensure his future survival."

A strong protest rose to Natalie lips, as she watched Dorian walk around the front of the car, to the passenger side—but, again, she remembered the betrayal in Nick's eyes. If she could only be certain . . . .

Slipping behind the wheel of the car with a sigh, she decided it was probably going to be a long night.

CHAPTER SEVEN

IT WAS relatively quiet at the precinct station, but it was still early. Nick stopped off at the public desk and leaned on it. "Any new calls, Norma?"

She looked up from the computer screen, smiled, then continued typing. "Nothing, Nick. That's a good sign, right?"

"One less dead body in Toronto? Yeah, that's a good sign. Thanks." Shaking his head, Nick continued into the squad room. He craned his neck, looking through the glass window. It gave him a direct view of his desk and Schanke's desk. Schanke wasn't there.

Deciding that his luck was changing—with no new cases to add—Nick headed for his desk and sat down. He was just about to reach across to Schanke's desk, to see what had happened on the Kenko case during his absence, when he knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that his luck just wasn't going to hold.

"Is that—is *that* my long lost partner?" asked Schanke, with mock surprise. Nick winced as Schanke walked around to the aisle that ran through the office. "Car trouble?" he asked, *sotto voce*. "Man, everybody in this place knows that you baby that car. If you'd had car trouble, you would have taken the *whole* night off. What it is with that thing? It's like your life depended on it, or something."

Nick looked down to his desk, hiding a smile. "You never know." Then, noticing the signed copy of *Soap Opera Digest* prominently displayed on Schanke's desk, he sighed. "Look, about what happened with Dorian and Vivian last night—"

"Yeah, I'm real sorry about that." Schanke walked around to his own desk and sat down. "I didn't know there was any bad blood or anything."

"It's okay. There was no way you could've known. I only found out Dorian was in town when Janette called—"

"Right—at the Kenko scene." Schanke nodded. "Too bad, they seemed like nice people. You're, uh, not gonna have a problem with . . . ."

Nick smiled, as Schanke picked up the framed soap digest with a mixture of hope and religious reverence. "No. But

somebody else in this place might object."

"Are you kidding?" Schanke leaned across the desk. "I've gotten an offer of two bills for this so far. I'm holding out for three. Vivian's . . . uh, still around, right?"

"As far as I know. But I don't think she'll be signing any more autographs." When Schanke's face fell, he added, "What's with the Kenko case?"

"Oh . . . yeah." Schanke shifted through the stack of folders on the left hand side of his desk. "Nat's doing the autopsy tonight."

"I know." There'd been just enough strain in his tone of voice for Schanke to give him a questioning look. "I was planning to drop by the Coroner's Office."

Schanke started to rise from his chair. "If you're heading over now, I'll go with you—"

"No!" Inwardly, Nick winced at his exclamation. He turned to his typewriter and picked up a form, then fed it into the machine. "I'm not going now. She's probably still cutting. Later. And, we've got other cases to wrap up. Like that street artist—"

"Pulled a guy in on that one this afternoon. Petty theft gone bad," said Schanke. "You know the Kenko case is priority—it's still smoking. If we can't get a solid lead in the next twenty-four, we can kiss it good-bye." Then, he chuckled lightly. "Oh, I get it. You sly dog."

Surprised, Nick looked back at him. "What?"

"You don't want me around 'cause you're gonna ask Natalie to the dinner-dance, right?"

He turned his attention to the typewriter, his hands clasping the metal tightly. "I already--I already asked her."

"And?" pressed Schanke.

Nick stared across the room, seeing Natalie's face, Natalie's eyes. He'd never seen such doubt there before. And her words still echoed in his ears, inscribed on his heart. "She said she . . . didn't know."

Schanke's chair creaked as he leaned back. "Not good." When Nick looked up sharply, he waved a hand in dismissal, "But not bad, either. You've still got a chance, unless somebody else has asked her. I kinda thought she'd hold out for an invitation from you." He picked up a pencil from his desk, fingers from each hand at opposite ends as he stared off into space, a thoughtful expression on his face. "You know, I never thought of Natalie as the kind who'd play hard to get. But you *did* take your time asking her. Maybe she's just letting you know it's your turn to sweat."

The platen knob snapped off in his hand. Nick stared at it, then threw it down in disgust. "Look, can we just drop it?

"Not Mr. Chatty Cathy tonight, are you?"

He turned an exasperated gaze toward Schanke. "We've got a case to solve, don't we?"

"Don't *you*," corrected Schanke, rising from his chair. "I'm off shift as of—" he glanced down at his watch, "an hour ago. Captain asked me to hang till you sailed in. Myra wasn't happy—she had a potroast ready to go. It's gonna be shoeleather by the time I get home."

"Give her my apologies." Nick cleared his throat. "I guess I owe you for that, too. You got a minute—catch me up on the case?"

"Sure." Smiling, Schanke picked up a folder from the pile and handed it to him. "I went back to see the daughter today. Nothing. She's got a tight alibi—between five and thirty witnesses, depending on what Natalie comes up with for time of death. However, she *is* sole beneficiary."

Opening the folder, Nick scanned the papers, which tallied with Schanke's information. He shook his head and set it aside. "No, still doesn't feel right."

"Guess what? I agree with you." When Nick arched an eyebrow, he added, "Yeah, I'm a little worried, too." He picked up another file, opened it, and sighed. "Recent run down on our smash-and-grab repeaters. Two of 'em have felony homicide convictions, but nobody stands out. I've got records checking parole reports and violations. We should get that by morning."

Nick took the folder and set it aside, trusting Schanke's assessment of the situation. "Could be new talent. It's not like a smash-and-grab needs specialized training." He looked up at Schanke, again shaking his head. "But that doesn't fit. Why kill a man and leave empty-handed?"

"We don't know that he did."

"None of the cases were smashed."

Schanke pursed his lips. "Panic?" he offered, playing devil's advocate.

"No. He'd still grab something, anything." Nick looked away, across the office. There was something he was missing. If they could only be certain that nothing had been taken . . . . "We got an inventory yet?"

"Got hold of someone who can give us one."

Nick looked down at the folder Schanke passed him. "Diane Osgood."

"She sold him most of those doodads."

Smiling, Nick opened the folder. "I know."

"Wait-wait-wait, you *know*?"

Turning, he opened the folder flat on his desk, reading over Schanke's notes. "There are only so many dealers in Toronto who do ivory. I kept calling until I found a likely prospect. She wasn't there when I went by the office, but Kenko's name was on her secretary's Rolodex."

"You went *out*?" asked Schanke.

Nick looked up, grinning. "Yeah."

"You missed *All Passion Spent* to check out a lead? But . . . Monica was going to get back the test results. The video tape of which may be the only thing that'll get me through that pot-roast."

Shaking his head, Nick looked back at the contents of the folder, turning the page. "It was negative."

"It *was*?" When he looked up, Schanke was frowning. He raised a finger to his lips. "That mean's Kevin's *not* the father? She didn't sleep with Ryan . . . but what about that ski weekend?"

Laughing, Nick looked up from the file. "Schanke, how the hell should I know? I told you, I *don't* watch those things."

Schanke stared back at him. "Then, the test *wasn't* negative?"

"I told you," said Nick, still smiling. "I don't *know*. And I don't care."

Letting out a sigh of relief, Schanke placed his hand over his heart. "Thank God! I can't believe you lied to me."

The smile slipped from his lips. "What?"

"You just lied to me about Monica."

Nick stared, hearing an echo of Dorian's words. "It was a *joke*. It's just a soap opera, Schanke. It's not *real*."

"Well, you shouldn't say stuff like that. Or maybe I'll start thinking that you're lying about other things. Like . . . having car trouble?"

Nick winced and looked away. "Point taken. Sorry."

"Yeah, well, apology accepted. Just don't do it again." Still frowning, Schanke gestured toward the folder. "Osgood should be here tonight, about eleven or twelve—said she'd stop by after some museum dinner or something. So, for once, *you* get to do the preliminary."

"Okay. I'll be here when she shows." Nick started flipping through the files Schanke had given him. "Scene still sealed?"

"Yeah." Reaching over the desk, Schanke pulled out one of the folders. "That should have the scene photos and the content list so far. They started a full workover today, with his insurance people."

"Good. I'll need that to match what Ms. Osgood can come up with."

"Better get an alibi, too, while you're at it."

Nick looked up quickly. "I thought she was coming in as an assist?"

"The daughter put me in contact with the lawyer. Guess who Kenko specified to sell off the estate collection after he bit the big one?" Tapping the folder, he added, "Looks like a pretty hefty commission."

"If they were real," muttered Nick, looking down at the folder.

Schanke coughed aloud. "You're gonna tell me all that stuff's fake?"

"I didn't say *that*." Nick leaned back in his chair and frowned, looking up at Schanke. "I'm no expert . . . but it's possible."

"So, if they're fakes, they're worth squat, which blows any motive for her—" He threw up his hands.

"Which leaves us with a smash-and-grab gone bad."

"Which we have no way in hell of solving unless we've got prints, a witness, or know what to look out for at the local fences. So far, no prints, no witness, and we're not even sure anything was taken." Schanke tapped his hand against his chest. "You're giving me heartburn, here. And that pot-roast is sure gonna help. I'm going home." Heading out of the squad room, Schanke called aloud, "Somebody clock me out."

Nick rose quickly, following Schanke. "Schanke—I forgot, about last night? I talked to Vivian today and she said—she told me you said some good things about me. About me being a good cop. I . . . appreciate it."

"You *are* a good cop. Some of the time. Most of the time, you're just lucky—like having me for a partner." Schanke grinned. "Besides, if you can't lie for your friends, who *can* you lie for?" He lightly punched a fist into Nick's shoulder. "See you in twenty—no, wait a minute. You've got two days coming." He groaned. "I knew it—you're dropping this Kenko thing on me. But, don't let that stop you from having a good time. And call a florist."

Nick stared at him blankly. "What?"

Schanke leaned close and whispered, "Nat'll say 'yes.' I know she will. And they like these corsage things—but you gotta be careful when you pin them on." Again, he tapped Nick on the chest. "Call Myra, she'll tell you what to get."

He managed a ghost of a smile, his heart telling him that whether Natalie would accept his invitation to the dance was a dead issue . . . pretty much what *he'd* be, if things went badly at his interview. "I can manage it, Schanke. Thanks. For being a good partner. And . . . a good friend."

"What, you're gonna be off two days and you go all soft?" But Schanke continued to grin. "I'll put money on it, Nick. She'll say 'yes'. Trust me. Would I lie?"

Absently, Nick's hand rose to where Schanke had hit him. He turned and walked back to his desk. At first, he began to sift through the files, then let them fall from his hands. Nat would be at the office by now, well into the autopsy. If he waited just a little longer—

Frowning, he carefully stacked the files into a pile and headed for the door. There was no sense putting this off. In fact, any delay might be dangerous.

Nick stopped at the front desk, tapping it with his fingers. "Norma—would you tell dispatch I'm in transit to the Coroner's Office?"

"Okay, Nick." She nodded, then turned, picking up the radio handset. "Good luck."

He was two steps away from the desk. Whirling in place, he asked, "Huh?"

"With Natalie." Norma smiled at his surprise. "Schanke's right. She'll say yes."

Nick walked slowly back to the desk. "It's a *dinner-dance*."

"It's a *date*," corrected Norma, frowning. Her dark eyes narrowed. "What is it with you guys? Don't you know how important a first date can be? It means a hell of a lot more than you think it means."

Sighing, Nick leaned his elbow on the desk. "You don't know the half of it."

"She *will* say yes," promised Norma. When he frowned, she added, "And if she doesn't, I'm free. And so are they."

Nick followed her gesture toward the doorway, where several of the women from booking and information

were pretending not to pay attention to their conversation. "Should I assume this is a setup?" asked Nick, in a quiet whisper.

"No. Just a little friendly interest." She chuckled when he dropped his head to the desk in dismay. "And despite the fact that I love to dance—Nick, I hope she says 'yes'."

Wearily, he raised his head. They had no idea, none of them. But he managed a smile and a quiet, "Thank you," to Norma, before heading out to the car. There was no way they'd understand that the dinner-dance was the least of his worries.

The Caddy, thankfully, was running perfectly. He headed toward the Coroner's Office, intending to go over just what he'd say to Natalie. But his thoughts kept drifting back to Dorian. If he told her all that had happened, would she understand? Would it make a difference, even if she did . . . ?

Pushing back the heavy drapes that had been drawn across the open portico, Nicholas looked down into the street below. Rome usually smelled like cesspit by mid-June, but the streets had been cleared, cleaned, and strewn with flowers for the occasion. The wedding festivities had been under way since mid-day—the racket left him little more than fitful slumber. With the coming of darkness, torches and candles had begun to glow, creating a false day for a false city.

"Nicola? You must help me—"

He turned at the sound of Janette's voice. She pushed aside one of the heavy hangings that insured his safety from the sun and entered the room, feet bare and dressed only in a chemise. The gown over her arm was of a deep burgundy, with black laces, trim, and ties. "Are you only *now* dressing?" he asked.

She frowned, but prettily. "You should talk! I've seen you take hours, matching doublet and hose." But the frown turned into a look of helplessness as she ran toward him. "The silly serving girl's run off again. Or LaCroix's gotten peckish during the day and forget to tell us to hire another. Please, you *must* help me dress. I'm missing the party!"

Nicholas took the gown from her hands and fanned it out, then glanced at her. "Why not go in what you're wearing? You'd be very popular."

She slapped his arm lightly, then fussed with the ties of the gown as he held it. "I'm *always* popular. Tonight I want to turn heads. Perhaps even the head of the Borgia himself."

He laughed. "Cesare? He's taken to the church. Then again—" he gave her a stern look— "you've never had much care for a man's vow of chastity."

"As if any man *could* be chaste in thought and deed?" Taking the gown from his hands, she held it up against her, running her fingers along the fine material. "Not Cesare—he has eyes like LaCroix at times, and a heart for nothing but war. It's his father I'd like to tempt."

"The Pope?" asked Nicholas, taking a step back in mock-astonishment. "Blasphemy!"

"Oh, he's Pope in name, but has the weaknesses of all men, mortal or not." Coyly, she approached him, then leaned forward to kiss him on the lips. Before he could wrap his arms around her, she danced away, the burgandy cloth billowing like a flag of war as she moved. "Now, help me dress before you go to feed. And take care to mind the badges, this time."

Nicholas folded his arms. "I see nothing to gain in avoiding feeding on thugs who wear the Borgia crest."

"You'd better do so and soon. As well as pay your tithe, as LaCroix has told you, and wear the crest yourself. Mortals get too wrapped up in their petty games—they think that if you're not for them, you're against them and so are fair prey. These are dangerous times."

The serious expression didn't become her. He walked around her, Janette turning to face him, following his movements. "Then you should watch your dangerous words—how dare you speak so freely of the Borgias, then? And on the day of the girl's wedding?"

"Oh—wedding!" Janette gave a heavy sigh. "No more than thirteen years and she's already bedded her father *and* two of her brothers. She'll wear herself out before she's reached two-score years."

Nicholas paused, suddenly tiring of the game. "Janette—take care, there are ears everywhere. Slander should not be repeated so lightly in this place. For your own safety, fear to speak it."

"Never fear to speak the truth," said a voice from behind him.

He knew it was Dorian even before he turned. For her own part, Janette greeted the Archivist with a hiss, and ducked behind Nicholas, her fingers gripping his arm tightly.

"Not to fear, pretty Janette," said Dorian, sketching a bow. "Your time has passed. I won't need to hear your little secrets for many centuries."

Dorian hadn't changed—the eyes and hair were still dark. His doublet was black, with gray lacings, his hose gray with white stars embroidered in the knit. But it was arrogance that he wore now, in place of his dark cloak.

Nicholas straightened. He placed his hand over Janette's fingers, as much to reassure her as to remove her nails from his arm before she could tear his sleeve. "Have you come for me?"

"No, alas. I'm only here for information." Dorian sat down in a seat built into the window. "I was hoping you could help."

Nicholas took two steps toward him, Janette still hanging onto him. "You'll leave empty-handed and quickly. You're not welcome here."

Dorian's smile was like that of a well-fed wolf, contented, but still dangerous. "You've got backbone now. Good. LaCroix's taught you well. It's a pity he didn't think to teach you common courtesy." Sighing, Dorian picked

at the ties of his sleeve. "I wish to know where I can find a certain vampiress—Carlotta? Whom some fool poet seems to have dubbed 'the Golden Rose'?"

Those dark eyes looked up, pinning him. Nicholas wrenched himself away from Janette and turned, walking toward the window that overlooked the street. "I know of her."

"Where may she be found?"

He gripped the Tuscan stone of the portico tightly, staring down at the lights in the street below. "This is no interview. I'm under no compunction to answer you."

"True." Dorian's sigh was audible. "At least you didn't lie. In time, you may improve, Nicholas, but you're nothing more than a shadow of your master. My regards, lady. And to your master, LaCroix."

Nicholas stood at the window, not even turning when he knew Dorian had left. Janette's bare feet pattered across the wooden floor, as she joined him. "You should have told him," she said quickly. "LaCroix will—"

"The devil take LaCroix," hissed Nicholas. Pushing her aside, he stalked across the room, heading for the door.

"Where are you going?"

"To warn Carlotta."

If Janette said anything, it was lost to his growing anger. Nicholas ran down the steps of the house, to the road, and fought his way through the drunken revelers. The crowds filled the streets, making their way to the Papal apartments, where coins and sweetmeats would be tossed from the balconies when the entertainments had ended. Had the night not been so bright with candleflame and torchlight, he would have flown the distance. But there was too much chance of discovery this bright night and even his fear for Carlotta's safety couldn't override that instinct for self-preservation.

It took him many hours to make his way across the city, through the busy streets, to one of the far hills. Only then did the crowds thin and the skies blacken, so that he was able to take to the air, over the fields and the palazzos of the merchants, who'd begun to spend their ready cash on fine imitations of the houses of the wealthy families.

His heart knew fear as he landed not too far from the palazzo at which Carlotta had set up residence, for there was no candle or torchlight in the windows or at the front walk. She was known throughout Rome as a woman of grace and learning. For months he'd spent many an evening seated in one of the large parlors, talking to poets or painters, or even during the daylight, seated in her library, poring over the books and scrolls she'd collected over the centuries. To find her windows dark and uninviting would normally have meant that she'd wandered down to share in the wedding feast, to which she'd no doubt been invited.

But Nicholas knew that this wasn't the case. He opened the door and walked through the depths of the house, the stone having held off the heat of the day and draining off the cool of the evening. It took him a moment to orient himself, but he heard the sound of a single heartbeat, and the whisper of turning pages in the garden.

He paused at the doorway to the garden. She was small, looked even smaller dressed in the chemise and voluminous gown of fashion, with golden skin and close-set eyes. The poets adored her, having grown tired of the alabaster beauties that graced the great families of Rome and her surrounding city states and duchies. Their muses found new words and flights of fancy, in trying to praise the oriental beauty who spoke softly and with intelligence.

"Mortals would call you bewitched, to see you reading in the dark," he said, with forced lightness in his tone.

She looked up as he walked toward her, and smiled, her lips a dusky rose, against the bronze of her skin. "A mortal would have better manners," she chided. Setting aside her book on the stone bench, she walked toward him and took his hands in hers. "Niccólo, what brings you here? Are there no fair maidens for you to woo among the revelers? Or have the Borgias claimed them for their own beds?"

"You speak like Janette."

"There are some things women accept, of which men deceive themselves." Taking his hand, she led him to the bench and seated herself. "Which is why I'm here, and not among the wedding guests. But does not explain your presence."

Nicholas looked down at the hand held in his. "Dorian's here. He's asked for you."

"I know." He looked up sharply at her admission and found a sad smile graced her lips. "And he'll find me, here, in my garden, should he care to look."

"You can run."

"No, Niccólo."

"Then—" he paused, looking away, the memory the aftermath of Janette's ordeal returning to mind. "Will you stand for the interview?"

"I . . . cannot."

There was such certitude in her voice. He met her eyes, seeking some answer in the almond depths: "You'd be safe. Janette survived."

"Her crimes have never been against the Code, but against the heart." Carlotta touched a hand to his cheek. "Niccólo, I would not long survive past the interview."

He shook his head angrily. "No—what crime could *you* have committed?"

The sad smile returned to her lips and she sighed. "My mortal lover knows what I am."

"Make him forget."

She laughed lightly, then rose from the bench and walked across the path, to a trellis of sleeping flowers. "You say that so easily. No one who has ever truly loved could say such a thing. In love, Niccólo, one finds that part in another that completes the whole of yourself. In controlling it, influencing it, it becomes changed . . . and something other than what it was." She picked a small yellow flower from the trellis and held it in the palm of

her hand, stoking the petals with her fingertips. "He has letters in which we've discussed my condition. He could not be made to forget by another—so do not think to save me from myself."

"Then . . . bring him across."

"He does not wish it."

"Do it anyway." Confused at her obstinateness, he met her too-sad eyes. "If he returns your love, surely he would do anything so that you might survive."

"But *I* would not have it so." Carlotta returned to him, her gown rustling against the paved stone walkway. "You're too young among us, Niccólo. My lover's of a noble line, well-married, with two infant sons. His alliance with the Borgias means a bright future, for himself and his family. I would not take that from him. I love him too much."

She handed him the flower, but he rested his fingers alongside hers. "Dorian *will* have your secrets," he warned.

Carlotta seated herself beside him, leaving the flower in his hand. "I will decline the interview. Instead, I will walk into the sunlight." When he made a sound of protest, she held up her hand and there was steel in the softness of her voice. "Do not argue, Niccólo. It's true that he'll protest—it'll annoy him to lose one so old as myself—but there is still his sense of honor. I'm allowed this request and it must be granted when asked."

"No." Nicholas rose to his feet, his fist closing around the yellow flower. "There must be another way. I *will* find another way."

"Do so, Niccólo," she whispered, reaching up to catch his closed fist and bring it to her lips. "And if this is our farewell, then I gift you with my books, in which you take so much pleasure. I hope that in them you'll find the answers you seek."

He bent down, touching his lips to hers. The flower still clutched in his hand, he stalked back through the house, each step stoking the furious fire within him. He knew the name of her lover and knew, as well, that the man was at the wedding feast for the Pope's daughter. If the man had any honor, he'd return to Carlotta's palazzo and let her bring him across, or burn the letters and let her erase the memory of her existence from his mind. She would be saved, then. And Dorian would not win.

Nicholas had hoped the crowds would thin with the onset of full night, but the ranks of the revelers had swelled to such proportions that he was often forced to travel above the street level, moving from rooftop to rooftop or even balcony to balcony as he made his way across Rome. By the time he reached the wedding feast, the last songs had been sung, the happy couple carried to their chamber, and the deed pronounced witnessed. The guests had left with wine and food and gifts, leaving only the commoners still drinking, dancing, and singing in the streets.

There was no time to head to the house of Carlotta's lover—the sun was already beginning to peer over the rim of the world. And so Nicholas returned to his palazzo as quickly as he could, racing the rays of light through the streets, knocking down the smoldering torches in his haste. He dashed into the darkness of the house—and into Janette's arms.

She glared at him, angry. "Nicola! What kind of a fool can you be, you haven't fed! I've spent half the night looking for you. And now, to race the sun!" But her eyes softened as she saw his face. "Ah, but I can forgive you. Come, spend the day in my chambers. I'll watch over you."

He stared at the wall, at her, at the floor, but found no sense in anything. Only as he turned and saw the light drive the shadow from the street, beyond the threshold of the door, did his reason return. "Too late," he whispered. "I'm too late. Carlotta—" Without warning, he dropped to his knees on the floor. "I've failed her. Janette, she's chosen to walk into the sun. I've failed her."

"Sssh!" Janette placed her arms around him, holding him against her like a child. "Nicola, you cannot save the world. You must be content to do what you can and no more. How could you hope to win against Dorian?"

He looked up as she mentioned the name, then saw her draw back in surprise, as he spat, "Dorian!"

"I see such things in your eyes, Nicola . . . they frighten me." Janette shivered and rose to her feet, backing away from him. "Be sensible, wait for LaCroix to return. He'll know what to do."

"He'll try to stop me, as he did the last time." Nicholas struggled to his feet, leaning against the wall. "But he's not here. And this time, I'll have Dorian's blood. I swear it." When she made a sound, he pointed at her. "And if LaCroix returns, you're to tell him none of this. Do you hear? *None* of it."

Janette's eyes widened in fear. Hissing at him, she turn and fled up the stairs, to her rooms. Only then did he realize that he'd raised his fist, threatening to strike her. Leaning against the wall, he closed his eyes. Dorian had been right in that—his words and actions just now had been nothing more than a mimic of LaCroix. Only he hadn't the heart—or lack of heart—to follow through.

But his fist clenched at his side, smacking the stone wall against which he rested. Dorian would be surprised when they met again. This time, there would be no LaCroix to stand between them. And Dorian, finally, would pay for all of the sorrow he had caused and the lives he had taken.

Grace was at the front desk as he entered. Nick nodded to her, heading for the lab door. "Hi, Grace."

"Hi, Nick—wait!" She rose from behind the desk and moved between him and the door. When he backed up a step and gave her a questioning look, she cleared her throat. "This is none of my business, but . . . ."

"What?"

"Have you asked Natalie to the dance yet?"

He settled for a sharp smile in response. "You're right—it's none of your business. She in?"

Grace's face fell at the lack of any humor in his tone. Wearing a carefully blank expression, she moved back to the desk. "One minute, Detective. I'll buzz her and see."

The temperature in the room dropped about thirty degrees. Hanging his head, Nick walked back to the desk. "Grace—I'm sorry. I've got . . . a lot on my mind."

For a moment she sat there, eyeing him, then a slight smile crossed her lips. "Yep. You're sincere, all right. Apology accepted. Guess I asked for that—I was just being nosy. But the reason I asked—" She glanced up at the door to the lab, then back to him. "Natalie came in with this guy earlier. Didn't quite catch the name. 'Bout your height, real dark hair and eyes . . . ?"

"Dorian," said Nick, trying with all his might to keep his tone neutral.

But enough of the inflection got through for Grace to raise an eyebrow. "Could be. Just that . . . I like to keep an eye on my girl. Sometimes she doesn't know how good she's got it." When he didn't answer, she nodded toward the door. "Go on. She's probably expecting you, anyway."

"Thanks." Flashing her a quick smile, Nick moved toward the door. Once there, he almost turned around and left—but he had to face Natalie for her safety, as well as his own.

Natalie was standing at the sink as he entered, still wearing her greens and scrubbing her hands. When she heard the door, she looked over her shoulder. "Grace?" But then she saw it was him. And something in her eyes went from friendly to coldly professional. "Nick." She turned back to the sink, gesturing with a nod toward a sheet-covered corpse, which rested on a trolley. "The preliminary work's been done on Kenko."

"And?" he asked, matching that 'all business' tone of voice.

Picking up a towel, she dried her hands, eyes on the corpse. "I haven't finished the write-up yet, but it looks like you're gonna be stuck dragging the bureau into court as the murder weapon." When that image brought a smile to his lips, she smiled in return, then said, "Actually, it's a contributing cause. I'll show you."

Natalie walked past him, dropping the towel, grabbing his arm and pulling him over to a counter. "Stand . . . there," she said, moving him into place. Then she turned her back to him, glancing over her shoulder to check his position, as well as the corner of the counter. "Okay, so I'm Kenko—adjusting for the height. The counter's the bureau."

"And what am I?" he asked.

"Life support." Without warning, she threw herself backwards.

"Nat!" Nick caught her, before she could hit her head on the counter.

"Freeze!" Natalie tilted back her head and looked up at him, smiling. "From the location of the wound and the angle, this is about it."

Nick nodded. "All right—so he was probably pushed. Or slipped."

"That's your problem, although I'd vote for 'pushed'—there was carpeting on the floor. I could take a look at his shoes, though." Raising a hand to her head, she added, "Skull fracture, head trauma, internal hemorrhaging. About an inch to either side and he probably would have been okay. As it was—"

Natalie straightened, as if to move out of his grasp, but Nick raised his hands to her shoulders. She met his gaze, then looked away. "He was probably alive when he hit the floor. The internal bleeding killed him, say thirty to forty-five minutes after the blow."

"Then he was left for dead?"

"Looks like it."

"Time of death?"

"Between four and six yesterday afternoon. I could try to get it closer, but it's pretty problematical. I don't think I'll be able to pin it down further." Again, she went to move away, but he tightened his grip on one shoulder. "Nick—"

There was a warning note in her tone. Nick opened his hands and held them away from her. "We need to talk."

"I know." Natalie walked away from him, back behind her desk.

Nick stood there for a moment, waiting, but she stared down at the blotter on her desk. "You went to see Dorian today. After I said not to."

Her eyes flashed angrily as she looked up at him. "You're not my keeper."

"But you know how dangerous he is. He's a *killer*."

"He's an archivist."

"He's a *vampire*."

"*So are you*!" she countered.

"We're *not* the same." Nick turned away, remembering how he'd said those words to Vivian, earlier. "Why do you think we're all the same? We're *not*."

"Define 'you'."

"You. Vivian. Mortals."

"So, is this a 'mortal-vampire' thing, then?" Natalie moved around the desk toward him. "Because if it *is*, I'm really getting tired of it." But then, she stopped. After a pause, the anger seemed to drain from her eyes and she gave him a wan smile. "Yeah. I went to see Dorian. And . . . you're right. You *aren't* the same."

"Thanks." Sitting down the edge of her desk, he stared at her, trying to figure out what it was that he saw in her eyes. "I guess we should put all our cards on the table?"

"I guess so. Did—did you go out today? In the sunlight?"

He could have answered her. He'd been so proud of that small accomplishment. But there it was, in her eyes, that . . . doubt. "Why?"

She seemed surprised by the question. Frowning, she said, "Because I need to know."

"Or . . . does *Dorian* need to know?"

"*What*?"

"He's using you to get at me."

Natalie shook her head slightly, as if not believing what he was saying. "Look, if anybody's using me, it's *not* Dorian. Nick, I tried to talk to him, tried to get him to cancel the interview, to back off for a few days." She looked down at the ground. "It didn't work."

"So what was that business about sight-seeing?"

"And what about drinking that blood right in front of me, after you'd promised to keep to the schedule?"

Natalie met his eyes and he looked away quickly, seeing the hurt he'd caused her. "All right. That was stupid." Then he looked back at her. "But so was spending time with Dorian."

"I told you, I was trying to get him to lay off."

"I can fight my own battles."

"This doesn't have to *be* a battle!"

Nick chuckled bitterly. "Then you don't know Dorian well enough."

"Maybe *you* don't know Dorian well enough."

He stared, as she crossed her arms defiantly. "Wait a minute—you *like* him? Nat, he's—" Nick searched his memory for words, but nothing was quite foul and black enough to describe Dorian accurately.

"That's always the way with you, isn't it? Black or white, right or wrong? Well, I don't think you've given him a chance."

Nick closed his eyes, pushing back the anger in his heart, the image of Janette, battered and abused, coming to mind, and poor Carlotta. When he opened his eyes, Nat was still glaring at him. "*I* haven't given him a chance, huh?" he asked. "And what is it *you've* given him?"

She turned her head as if slapped. There was a warning bell in his brain that screamed at him to stop. But there was also that darker, older part of him that had been trained so well, to return wound for wound, hurt for hurt. "Because if this is that thing with Roger all over again, I'm not going to able to save you this time. You've upped the ante, Nat. You've moved from mortals to vampires. What is it about us, anyway? *You like* to be scared? Live on the edge, but still be safe?" He rose from his seat and took a step toward her. "Because Dorian isn't safe. He's a lot of things, but safe was *never* part of the package."

Biting her lip, Natalie turned her head away from him. Tears sparkled at the corners of her eyes and she was holding her arms tightly against her.

The warning bells in his head had been stunned to silence by his words. He watched her, knowing the sound that echoed in his ears was that of a heart breaking, but whether it was his or hers he wasn't certain. He knew how to hurt her, how to scare her—he'd proven that before. And she'd forgiven him, stood by him, in spite of that. But this time, he had no excuse for his actions.

"Nat—I didn't mean . . . ." Words failed him when she looked at him, met his eyes. "I just . . . I need to know about Dorian. I need to know . . . how to destroy him."

Any light in her eyes that had survived his first onslaught, was now dead and buried. Clearing her throat, Natalie walked past him, to her desk. "Nick, I think you'd better leave."

"Nat . . . ?"

"Just . . . get out."

The beep of the phone in his coat pocket startled him. Turning away, he reached into his coat, pulled out the phone, and opened it with a snap. "Knight here."

"Nick—it's Vivian. If you're with Dr. Lambert don't . . .don't say it's me."

Her voice indicated her terror. Nick glanced over his shoulder, at Natalie. "Okay . . . Janette."

"I've found out something about Dorian. I have to talk to you—I need your help. Can I meet you, now?"

He continued to watch Natalie, as she mechanically opened a file folder and sat at her desk. When she picked up a pen, her hand was shaking. "Where?" he asked.

"Not your loft. He'd expect that."

"The Raven?"

Vivian's voice paused and he heard traffic behind her . . . she was at a pay phone. "All right. He thinks I'm running errands. If he finds out I was there, I could have been picking up supplies."

"Twenty minutes?"

"Yes. But . . . hurry."

Nick snapped the phone shut. Natalie looked up at the noise, met his eyes briefly, then looked down at her paperwork. When he leaned his palms on her desk, she pushed her chair back, putting distance between them. "I have to go. When the autopsy report's ready—"

"I'll have someone run it over." Again, she looked up at him, eyes dark, tears still sparkling at the corners. "It's true, then. You want Dorian dead?"

"If it's him or me."

She leaned her head on her hand, staring up at him. "Could I have been so wrong?"

"About him?"

"About you."

It *had* been the sound of Natalie's heart breaking, earlier. He knew that only because he felt his own heart break as she spoke. Swallowing a lump in his throat he turned and walked to the door. But once there, he stopped and looked back. "Nat?"

This time, she didn't look up. "Yeah?"

"About that dance, on Saturday . . . ?"

The eyes that met his across the room belonged to a stranger. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Maybe not." He wanted to say something more, anything—about the Kenko case, about how sorry he was, about only wanting to protect her—but the words weren't there. And Vivian's frantic phone call had to be considered. If he got to the Raven early enough, he might be able to get something useful from Janette.

Smacking the door open with the flat of his hand, Nick stalked out, leaving some part of himself behind.

He didn't ignore Grace—he just didn't hear her—as he continued out of the building and into the parking lot. Best not to think about it, best not to think about Natalie. He'd lost her, no matter what happened. If Dorian killed him . . . well, that was the end. If he managed to kill Dorian . . . .

As he drove to the Raven, Nick considered his options. He'd have to leave Toronto. He couldn't work with her, work *near* her, day after day. And he wasn't about to ask her to disrupt her short, mortal life to accommodate his wishes. It would be easier for him to just pick up and walk away. He'd done it often enough. It should be easy by now.

But he knew that was just a lie. It was never easy. And he had a feeling this time would be the worst of all.

When he arrived, the Raven was packed. The bouncer moved aside as he entered, and he felt the vampire's eyes on his back, watching him as he roughly made his way through the couples that crowded the dance floor. He was in no mood to be gentle, with vampires or mortals. But they were in no danger from him. His anger was turned inward, against himself. He'd been a fool to take Natalie into his confidence, to let her convince him that there was something in him worth saving, worth trying to bring back into the light.

Janette was dancing on the outskirts of the crowd, a cigarette in one hand. Seeing him, she turned and walked quickly away, heading toward her office.

Nick pushed through the crowd and managed to outmaneuver her. Placing himself in the doorway, his hands to either side of the doorjamb, he blocked her exit.

She glared at him, then turned her back, taking a drag off her cigarette, her right arm folded across her chest. "Go away. I can't talk to you. You're dead."

"That's never stopped you before." Standing behind her, Nick put his arms around her waist and drew her close, then kissed her bare neck, below her choker.

For a moment, she leaned against him, purring. Then Janette turned in his arms and broke his embrace, pushing him away. "Nicola, you're insane. Don't you know Dorian will *kill* you?"

"Not if I can get him first." As she stared at him in stunned amazement, he added, "I need some information. About your interview."

Taking another drag from the cigarette, she leaned against him, placing his arms around her. "It was so long ago." He felt her shiver and she pulled his arms around her even more tightly, eyes closed. "No."

"And LaCroix's interview."

Her eyes shot open, wide, and she turned her head to stare at him. "Who told you that?"

"Dorian. He told me to ask you about it."

"Dorian!" She spat the name, then looked away. "You know, Nicola, there might be some hope. I've been asking around. It seems that Dorian and the Enforcers have had a . . . difference of opinion?"

"About what?" he whispered, his lips close to her ear.

Janette's hand reached back, to stroke the side of his face. "No one seems to know. It was recent, perhaps as little as two centuries ago . . . ?" She shrugged in his arms. "Publicly, they still support him. Privately, well, there are murmurings that they would look kindly on whomever could rid them of him."

"Will no one rid me of this meddlesome priest?" said Nick, half to himself.

Smiling, Janette turned her head to look at him. "Words to that effect. Caused quite a bit of trouble the last time, didn't it?" Completely turning, she placed her arms around his neck, her lips inches from his. "And that should be enough to save you, yes?"

Nick kissed her lightly, then smiled. "I still need to know, Janette. About the interview?"

Her eyes narrowed and she dropped her arms from his neck to his chest, trying to push him away, but he held her forearms, trapping her. "Let's see if there's a booth free, shall we?"

There was—the booth in the back, raised slightly, where Janette could keep an eye on the entire club and yet remain hidden. Nick all but dragged her to the booth, letting her fall into the seat, then slipping in beside her. She grabbed the ashtray and tapped off the ash from her cigarette angrily, then slipped just a few more inches away, putting distance between them.

"I can see *you're* in a good mood," she muttered. Then, she looked up at him, and something in her eyes softened. "Nicola, there's something troubling you. Something . . . dark."

"The interviews?" he asked again, placing an arm around her bare shoulder.

Janette stared at him a moment longer, then shrugged lightly and tapped her cigarette into the ashtray again. "Neither is a pleasant memory. My own interview . . . well, you were there. You *saw*."

"You lied to Dorian."

"Yes." She shot a glance at him, as he leaned against the back wall of the booth. "Because I was afraid. I tried to . . . seduce him." Shivering again, she leaned back against his arm and shoulder. "He knows us too well, Nicola. He knows how to use our best weapons, our best defenses, against us." Janette shook her head, her voice breaking slightly. "No . . . I can't talk about it. It's enough that he couldn't condemn me. I was nothing more or less than LaCroix made me."

Reaching for the cigarette, Nick plucked it from her hand and crushed it into the ashtray, despite her cry of protest. "And . . . LaCroix?"

Janette pouted, glaring at her crushed cigarette, then at him. "I was *there*. It took ten Enforcers to take us to Dorian. And, of course, I wasn't allowed to witness the interview. It wasn't permitted." Turning her gaze away, she stared out over the club. "An interview usually takes two days, perhaps three. Dorian interviewed LaCroix for . . . ten."

Surprised, Nick started. "LaCroix *lied* to Dorian?"

"Oh, no. He simply refused to talk." Her voice was low, as she added, "He's strong-willed. They were evenly matched—LaCroix and Dorian. That's why Dorian couldn't break him. Like two sides of a coin, the false and the true. Dorian tried . . . everything." She winced, reached automatically for the cigarette, then stopped herself. "I was in the next room. I heard . . . most of it. Sometimes I screamed, so that I couldn't hear. But I could only scream for so long . . . ."

For a moment, she was silent, her eyes still looking at the past. Then she leaned close against him and wrapped his arm around her. Eyes closed, she rested against him.

Nick touched his head to hers, whispering, "And Dorian just let him go?"

"He had to, it's part of the Code. You can avoid the interview by walking into the sunrise. Or face Dorian and refuse to talk. If he succeeds within ten sunrises, your life is forfeit. But if he fails, you're free of him. He can take no reprisals, nor can you ever be interviewed again." Her eyes opened and she looked up at him. "Dorian walked away."

"And LaCroix?"

"It was a week before he could see. Some weeks after that before he could walk again." Suddenly, Janette sat upright, pushing aside his arm. "What's Dorian's whore doing here?"

Vivian had entered the club and was wandering among the dancers. Quickly, Nick caught Janette's arm, drawing her back against him. "She's here to see me."

"What are you doing, Nicola? You'll use her against him?" She met his eyes, staring long, until he looked away. "You're not the type to seduce her. And if you kill her . . . it will only make it worse for you."

"I'm going to help her escape Dorian."

Closing her eyes, Janette smacked the palm of her hand against her forehead. "Of course, forgive me. I forgot, the brave *chevalier*, defending helpless maidens!"

Releasing her, Nick rose to his feet, but Janette caught his arm before he could escape the booth. "Don't forget she's Dorian's creature!" she warned, in a harsh whisper. "And don't let your heart rule your head. She can't be trusted—I've seen the type before."

"I'll try to remember." Leaning forward, he kissed her forehead.

But Janette caught his collar and pulled him lower, so that their lips met. After a moment, she drew back, but still held his collar, her eyes meeting his. "Do nothing foolish, Nicola. And . . . promise that you'll come back to me, as always?"

He kissed her again, then left the booth, heading for the dance floor. Vivian was like a lost soul among the damned, blocked off at every turn, her attempts to escape the crowd frantic. Nick pushed his way into the crowd, then grabbed her shoulder.

Vivian whirled, hand to her mouth, choking back a scream. When she saw who it was, she relaxed slightly. Nick placed his arm around her shoulder and guided her through the crowd, knowing that the couples who hadn't parted for her would think twice about hemming him in.

Once they were free of the dance floor, he took her to a secluded corner, near the wall. She was pale and shaking, but seemed otherwise unharmed. "Thank God you're here," she gasped.

Nick only nodded, looking back to the booth—Janette was gone. "Have you left Dorian?"

"Not yet. But—" she said quickly, as he frowned, "I'm giving it some serious thought. Especially after what he said tonight."

"Which was?"

"I think he's got plans for Dr. Lambert."

He thought he'd left that part of his heart behind him, in the lab. But it turned cold within him when he heard Natalie's name. "What kind of 'plans'?"

Vivian stared up at him, hesitated, then blurted, "He wants her to bond with him. Then he's going to bring her across."

The cold within him was starting to spread. Nick looked across the dance floor, as if seeking an answer there. "But . . . Natalie's immune. He can't mesmerize her."

"He can, if she submits--willingly surrenders her soul to him."

Nick shook his head and looked down at her, wanting to see a lie in her eyes. "Natalie wouldn't do that."

"She might . . . if he promised to let you go."

Raising his hand to his mouth, Nick looked away, his cruel words to Natalie taking on new meaning. 'And what is it *you've* given him . . . ?'

"She hasn't—?"

"No," he answered sharply. Nick turned his eyes back to Vivian, swallowing hard. "No. I would have seen it in her eyes."

Vivian sighed, relieved, and leaned against the wall. "Then I'm in time." She closed her eyes. "And . . . I was working on his notes, for the interview."

For a moment, she was silent. "Yes?" asked Nick.

Vivian's blue eyes stared up at him, filled with fear. "He plans to condemn you."

"On what grounds?"

"For destroying your master, LaCroix." She reached forward, grabbing his arm. "Nick, you've gotta run. You've gotta save yourself. The Enforcers may not go after you—Dorian's no longer on good terms with them. In fact, they might just *support* you if you moved against him."

Nick placed his hand over hers, then looked up. "Janette said—" But Janette wasn't in the booth any longer. In fact . . . he didn't see, or sense, her anywhere in the club. He glanced down at Vivian. "If this was a vendetta, a private matter, could the Enforcers interfere?"

"I . . . don't know. All I know is that he wants you dead and he's willing to let the Enforcers do it for him." Her blue eyes troubled, Vivian looked away, shivering.

"Nick, I have to get back. And you have to leave."

"I can't."

Vivian stared up at him and he gave a half-shrug. "I can't leave Natalie."

"She may already be lost. If she's under his control—?"

"I can't believe that." He placed a hand on her shoulder, then cupped her chin with his palm. "If Dorian finds out you've been here, that you warned me . . . ."

Again, she shivered, meeting his eyes. "I know."

"You *have* to break with him."

"I don't think I can."

"The interview's tomorrow night, right?" When she nodded, hesitantly, he asked, "What does the Code say about what Dorian can do?"

"Dr. Lambert's part of your interview. He can't bond with her *or* bring her across until *after* he condemns you at the interview."

"Okay." Nick took a deep breath, releasing her. "So I keep Natalie with me for the day. I can hide her." Then he met Vivian's eyes. "I can hide both of you."

"I . . . don't know."

"Think about it." Putting his hand on Vivian's shoulder again, he smiled down at her. "Look, I've got an appointment at the station. My shift ends at four. Meet me there, and we'll pick up Natalie at the Coroner's Office."

She looked around wildly, like a trapped animal. "I want . . . Nick, I don't know."

"I'll wait for you," he promised, squeezing her shoulder lightly. "I can wait until five, but that's the latest." When she nodded, he turned her toward the crowd. "Go ahead. I'll wait. We shouldn't be seen leaving together . . . just in case."

Vivian started, then stared at him. "You mean, I might have been followed?"

Nick paused, then shrugged. "Not if he can't count on the Enforcers to back him up. They used to do all his leg work for him. Without them—?" Nick smiled. "You're safe enough."

Her eyes told him in no uncertain terms that she didn't *feel* safe. As Nick leaned against the wall, he watched her thread her way through the crowd to the door, also paying attention to any interest shown in her departure. But the dancers danced, the drinkers drank, and the music thrummed loud and low. No one noticed the loss of one, terrified mortal.

Nick started to make his way through the crowd, but stopped. Looking away, he again tried to find Janette, but knew that she'd left . . . no one would know where. She hated good-byes, always had. And, for a moment, he turned in place and swallowed the sights and the sounds and the passion of the Raven with his senses, wondering if this was, indeed, his good-bye to Janette, and the club, and the world in which he'd spent so many centuries.

CHAPTER EIGHT

She'd looked down at her paperwork when he'd left, the slap of his hand against the door cutting through her like a knife. It was such a final sound. For all the people who'd come and gone through that door, she'd never heard a noise like that before. And Natalie doubted she would again.

Her eyes looked at the form on her desk, but her mind couldn't concentrate on dates and times and other nonsense. She knew he'd gone to the Raven. To Janette.

Whenever things got bad, Nick went back to what he was. Never forward. Never to the future. Never to her.

It was better she find out now, really. Before she wasted her life trying to help him find something he probably didn't want. For him, it was just another way to spend a couple of decades. Something to do.

But she'd been so *certain* of him, that the only thing he really needed to be saved from was himself. He wanted to come back across. Fine. She'd find a way. She'd give him the hope that it could be done, the courage to do it, and a reason for trying.

The last part was selfish. Natalie knew she had no hold on him. There was every possibility that if she found a way to bring him back across one night, he'd be gone by morning. She was his *doctor*, after all. His *friend*. And . . . .

But that was before, when she thought she'd known him.

There was still a chance to salvage what was there—a phone call, drop by the station, drop by the loft . . . . But she didn't have the heart to try any more. She knew she didn't want him dead.

She knew she didn't want Dorian dead.

And she knew . . . that she couldn't have everything she wanted and what ever was going to happen was going to happen despite all of her best efforts. It simply wasn't up to her. Afterwards, she'd be there to pick up the pieces.

But she wasn't even sure of that much, any more.

The lab door hinges creaked as it opened slightly and her heart rose in her throat, half in hope that Nick had come back and half-dreading his return. She looked up, keeping her expression neutral.

Grace simply stared at her a moment, then walked into the lab.

She cleared her throat, managing an annoyed, "What?"

"I'm waiting for you to tell me to get lost."

Natalie looked down, scratching the back of her head, then managed a wan smile. "Doesn't look good, does it?"

"Didn't sound too good either, from where I was sitting. Lots of shouting, no words—" she explained quickly, as Natalie's eyes widened, the word 'vampire' echoing in her ears. Grace walked over to the desk, frowning. "He was wrong."

"About what?"

"Everything. They always are."

She managed a half-laugh at that, which made Grace smile. "No," she corrected. "They're not--" Then, meeting Grace's eyes, she couldn't help but smile herself. "Okay, so maybe *this* time . . . . "

"See!" Grace leaned on the edge of her desk. "It's *always* their fault for the first two hours. Then it's your fault for a couple of days. Then, if you're lucky, it's their fault *and* your fault." She reached into a pocket and took out her house keys. "Wanna borrow my rabbit's foot?"

"It would have to be a *big* rabbit," said Natalie.

"How big?"

"Maybe . . . Godzilla-sized?"

Grace winced and looked away. "Sounds bad."

She wasn't able to answer and so looked down at the form. Grace had no idea how bad it really was. How could you explain about pig-headed police detectives who also happened to be vampires, or Archivists who've walked the earth for centuries because they drank the blood of everyday people like her and Grace? Nope—just wasn't an option.

"Let me guess," said Grace. "It has something to do with that guy who came in with you tonight?"

Natalie looked up and met her friend's eyes. "Maybe."

"An old friend of Nick's?"

For a second, she believed in mental telepathy . . . or that more sound got through the lab door and into the outer office than she'd thought. "How did you know?"

"His reaction when I mentioned it." She moved quickly off the desk when Natalie drew in a breath through her teeth. "Sorry—it just slipped out."

Natalie closed her eyes. "It's not your fault. They know each other. I wouldn't call them 'friends' by any stretch of the imagination."

"Sounds like they have some unfinished business. And maybe you got caught in the middle?"

Opening her eyes, Natalie had to smile sadly. "Yeah. I guess you could say that."

"Is he worth it?"

"Who?"

"This other guy . . . Dorian?" Natalie must have made a face, because Grace cleared her throat. "I think you're on the verge of telling me to get lost, right?"

Natalie shook her head. "No. I don't . . . have an answer. We just met. He's . . . different."

"From Nick?"

"From everyone."

Grace quirked an eyebrow in challenge. "How?"

"He tells the truth."

Grace gave a low whistle and shook her head. "Nat, if he can remember birthdays and anniversaries and he doesn't watch hockey, nail him *now*. That type don't pass this way but once."

She couldn't help but chuckle, some of the heaviness lifting from her heart. "You make this sound like war."

"You never heard of the battle of the sexes?"

"That's one battle we're never going to win," she answered, leaning back in her chair.

"That's why we keep hoping the truces last. But . . . we never really lose, either."

"I think I've lost, this time." Looking down at the form on her desk, she remembered Nick's expression, just before he went out the door. Those dead eyes, again.

"So that's how you're gonna deal with it? Work yourself into a coma?"

"Well, I could go home and feed Sidney." Natalie sighed. "Unless you've got an alternative that isn't illegal, immoral, or fattening?"

Grace frowned. "Take all the fun out of it, why don't you? That knocks out the drinks and a half-gallon of chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream, doesn't it?" Then, Grace's expression changed to something not quite . . . subtle. "Spend some time with this other guy. The one who doesn't lie."

Natalie stared at Grace, astonished. "I just met him. Besides, it's not like that. *He's* not like that."

"Now who's lying?" Grace held up a finger in warning. "Okay, I'll shut up, *if* you can tell me with a straight face that he's not interested."

"*I'm* not interested," protested Natalie.

"You sure?"

The word was on her lips, but Natalie shut her mouth and frowned. Damn, but this telling the truth business was infectious.

Grace folded her arms triumphantly. "Thought so." Rising from the desk, she patted Natalie's shoulder. "Think about it, hon. You've been locked up in this place too long. 'Bout time you found out it's safe to hang out with guys other than cops."

There was no answer to that. Grace left and Natalie watched the door swing shut behind her.

Of course, Grace was wrong.

Nick was wrong.

There was nothing between her and Dorian.

He was a *vampire*. He was interesting. There was a lot she could learn from him—and only from him—that she could use to help bring Nick back across . . . even though that wasn't supposed to matter any more. There was still a lot she could learn from him. And there was

something about him, something that wasn't quite . . . complete.

The way Nick had seemed, when they'd first met.

Natalie shook her head to clear it and concentrated on the report in front of her. No, it wasn't possible. Grace was wrong about that, too. Work *was* the answer. At least, it would keep her busy, keep her from thinking.

The Kenko report was finished . . . after a few hours. Then a call came in on an unattended death that she was supposed to autopsy. It seemed someone found the attending physician, who was more than happy to sign off the death certificate as 'having died of a heart condition while under a doctor's care.' Which meant that was one less case for her to cut tonight.

Wearily, Natalie waved good-bye to the body the attendants wheeled out of her lab—he was going to a finer, cooler, quieter place—then sank down in her chair. God, but she was tired!

The Kenko file sat on her desk. Natalie picked up the phone to buzz Grace and ask her where the hell the courier was to take it over to the station . . . then stopped. It was a slow night. Maybe she should take it over herself? Nick might be there.

For a moment, she held her breath, staring down at the report in her hand. Maybe she could get him to explain *why* he wanted Dorian dead. Get her to understand. So she could make sense out of this mess and find some way to stop it before it all went horribly wrong. One last chance. She couldn't let him push her away again this easily. She had to be *sure*.

Picking up the report, Natalie moved to grab her handbag . . . but the lab door opened and Grace poked her head into the room. "There's someone here to see you."

"Yes?" The file dropped from her hand, onto the desk, as she carefully composed her expression, her heart beating a-mile-a-minute. If it were Nick, if *only* it were Nick . . . .

Dorian stepped into the lab, hesitating behind Grace. "Am I intruding, Dr. Lambert?"

Grace wrinkled her nose and mouthed the words, '*Dr.* Lambert?'

It was all Natalie could do to keep from laughing. But she managed somehow, settling for a smile. "No, it's all right. You've picked a slow night." She gestured around, at the sinks and steel trolleys. "If you don't mind—?"

"No, not at all."

Grace moved behind Dorian, then gave Natalie a gesture—she awarded two points to Dorian. Natalie made a gesture in return trying to tell Grace to get out—and wasn't all together sure she hadn't been caught by Dorian's quick eyes. But he pretended to look elsewhere. Which told her in no uncertain terms that she *had* been caught.

"Grace, you want to cancel the messenger heading to the precinct? I'll take this over myself."

Grace raised an eyebrow, then glanced at Dorian, who was absorbed in looking over her charts and diagrams on the walls. "If you're sure?"

"Yes." She waited until Grace left, then turned to Dorian. "I didn't expect to see you again, tonight."

"I suppose I should have called, but my new rental car doesn't have a phone. I really *am* lost without my cellular. And . . . Vivian." He frowned slightly, then asked, "Have you seen Nick this evening?"

The question gave her a moment's pause, but it really seemed like he didn't know. "Yes," she answered, smiling at how she was acquiring the vampires' ability for understatement. "He was here. Why?"

"I sent Vivian to give him the time and place of the interview several hours ago. She . . . hasn't returned."

His eyes were everywhere, except on her. "Nick wouldn't hurt Vivian."

"I wish I could be as certain as you." He scowled, finally meeting her eyes. "Never underestimate LaCroix's get. The blood runs true. Damn! I knew I should have sent her away—"

There was a flash of gold in his eyes. Natalie started, her hands going to the flat surface of her desk for support. "She probably had car trouble or something," she answered. "She'll call you when she can."

It sounded lame, even to her. Dorian looked away, shaking his head. "She can't reach me. Without the phone . . . ." Then he closed his eyes. "I can't pretend that I'm only concerned with her safety. These two attacks have proven how vulnerable I am. I would have been killed, if not for you."

He seemed to age as he closed his eyes and turned away—Natalie saw a weight on his shoulders that she hadn't noticed before. "That's not true."

"That's very true." He gave a short laugh. "I've never been alone before an interview before. Enforcers, mortal slaves or servants or secretaries—there was always someone there." Dorian met her eyes and she saw something very frightened and very vulnerable within those dark depths. "I need someone to watch over me, during the daylight."

Natalie stared at him, the words not quite making sense. "Uh-huh? I don't think—"

But then Dorian turned his back to her and headed for the door. "No. It wouldn't be a good idea. I'd hoped—" He stopped in mid-step, looked at her over his shoulder, then shook his head. "No. I've interfered enough with your life." He started toward the door again.

"Just . . . just watch over you?" asked Natalie, unable to keep the hesitation out of her voice.

Again, he stopped, then turned completely, to face her. "To be there in case something happens, like this afternoon. I feel . . . safe with you around." He raised the knuckles of his gloved right hand to his lips, the hesitation still in his eyes. "If you're afraid, I'd understand. I can promise that I won't harm you. But you've no reason to trust me."

"I've got every reason," she answered evenly, meeting his gaze. "You won't lie to me."

"I won't touch you," he promised. "As to what Nick will think—"

"I don't care what Nick thinks, any more."

Dorian flinched, then looked away. "I'm truly sorry to hear that. I never wanted to ask you to choose sides. I'd—I'd better go."

Leaving the desk, Natalie hurried to get between him and the door. "No, it's all right. I'll . . . watch over you."

Those dark eyes met hers, searching her soul for a moment, before a smile quirked his lips. "Thank you. It means a lot to me."

Natalie crossed her arms. "I can't promise I won't try to talk you out of doing the interview."

"I wouldn't ask that of you. I don't want to interfere with your loyalties." Dorian looked down at the floor again. "And I'm *not* asking you to choose sides."

"Maybe, you don't have to." When Dorian looked up, curiously, she added, "Nick's admitted that he wants you dead."

He sighed. "I was afraid of that." Reaching across, he placed his gloved hand lightly on her arm. "Now you *mustn't* come with me."

"Why?"

She wasn't able to keep the challenge out of her voice, but his expression remained very dark and very serious. "It's too dangerous. If he finds out where I am, there could be more gas. Or a fire. Being with me could put you in danger."

"Not if he knew I was there. Nick won't hurt me."

"Even now?"

The suspicion in his voice gnawed at the certitude in her heart. But there was still enough faith within her to answer honestly, "Even now."

After a pause, Dorian nodded. "All right."

"Let me get my purse. And my bag—just in case." She scooped up her emergency bag—which she still hadn't unpacked from her trip to Nick's last night—her purse . . . and the Kenko case folder. "We'd better take your car. Nick's likely to put an APB out on mine."

She started toward the lab door, but Dorian offered her his arm. There was no pause as she shifted the emergency bag and folder to her other hand and looped her arm through his. Grace raised an eyebrow as they walked into the outer office.

Natalie dropped the Kenko folder on her desk. "Could you have someone take that over to the precinct for me?"

"I just canceled—" Then she met Natalie's eyes, looked at Dorian, and smiled. "Sure thing."

"Thanks. And—one more favor?" Withdrawing her arm from Dorian's, Natalie reached into her purse and got out her extra apartment key, which she held before Grace. "Could you run by my place tonight on your way home and feed Sidney? I left early this afternoon and he's probably hanging off the drapes by now."

Grace's eyes widened and she took the key with two fingers. "Tonight?"

Then Natalie looked at Dorian. "And . . . tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Snatching the key from Natalie's hand, Grace grinned. "All right. You have a nice night. I mean—day."

"Thanks." Not daring to meet Grace's eyes, she looped her arm through Dorian's again and led him to the door.

"I'm sorry," Dorian said, "but—arriving late and leaving early? Dr. Lambert, I'm doing irreparable damage to your reputation."

Natalie laughed, not daring to look behind her, at Grace. "I don't want to *talk* about what you're doing to my reputation."

"May I take your bag, at least?"

Gladly, she surrendered the emergency kit to Dorian's hands, noticing that his grip seemed to have improved. Checking his hands when they got to wherever they were going was going to be a first priority. And after that . . . .

She wondered what the going hourly rate was for vampire baby-sitters.

CHAPTER NINE

Nick tried to pay attention to the files on his desk, but his eyes kept going to the clock. He'd been back since eleven. It was now almost two . . . and still no sign of Diane Osgood.

Not that he didn't have enough backed up paperwork to keep him occupied. Going through the various reports on the Kenko case alone kept him busy. Forensics reported fingerprints of Kenko, his cleaning lady, and his daughter were scattered throughout the apartment. Nick guessed the other prominent set of prints would belong to Diane Osgood—but if she'd sold Kenko even half of the items in his collection, she'd had good reason to be there and it would seem suspicious *not* to find her prints at the scene. Other than that, there was nothing out of the ordinary, nothing that could be remotely called a 'clue'.

He looked over the photos of the individual items in Kenko's collection, making mental notes on those that were obvious forgeries . . . which was pretty much all of them. It was true that some of the forgeries had attained a value of their own by surviving the passage of time intact, or being identifiable as having come from the hand of a fairly famous or infamous forger . . . but he still couldn't understand why Kenko limited his collection to fakes. The only one who could probably tell him was Kenko. And Kenko wasn't expected to say much. But the autopsy might reveal *something*.

Nick looked down to find his hand on the phone receiver, then withdrew it quickly. He couldn't call Natalie. Not yet. There was still a chance that she'd drop by with the autopsy results herself. If they had that to start with—something safe and ordinary—maybe they could start to mend the bridges that had broken and burned during their clash at the lab.

Shaking his head, he looked down at the file folder on his desk, eyes glancing across the pictures of ivory figurines and period furniture. The pieces had a history. Just like he had a history. Just like Dorian had a history. If he could get Natalie to understand what Dorian was, really *was* . . . if he told her what had happened all those years ago, to Janette, and to Carlotta, maybe he could get her to understand why he hadn't been able to save them from Dorian.

But then, in the many centuries since either run-in with Dorian, he'd gone over each memory in his mind a hundred times, a thousand times. And not even *he* was certain why he'd failed both so lamentably.

Merriment continued in the streets as he left the palazzo and the sleeping Janette—he neither knew nor cared where LaCroix had taken himself. The last rays of the sun were still visible in glints from copper awning joints or silver bridles on the decorated trappings of horses being led from the streets to night stables. Nicholas ignored these, and the drunken revelers, and the pretty ladies who hoped to entice the visitors and revelers into enjoying their favors.

It was easier to move, the crowds were thinner on this second night of festivities, but he still had to take to the streets. Too much light, too much attention and gaiety stirred the night. To fly would be to court disaster. And, somehow, in his heart, he knew that speed was no longer essential, for there could be no successful conclusion to his mission. When he was beyond the reach of the lights and the eyes that might spy him, he took to the sky, finding comfort in the deepening darkness, the kiss of the wind, the false freedom found in the air, so far above the petty earth.

Carlotta's palazzo was dark, as it had been the night before . . . but the darkness was close, rather than cavernous. He walked through the house and found it silent again—her servants having fled, no doubt. But when he heard the heartbeat in the garden, and the turning of a page, his steps grew lighter. Running to the rear door, he paused at the archway, wanting nothing more than to see the dark-haired beauty as he'd seen her the night before, enjoying her book among the scented memories of the day.

It wasn't Carlotta who sat on the stone bench in the garden, turning the pages of the great volume . . . but Dorian. His clothing was as the night before, black velvet with gray lacings and accents. He looked up, then closed the book and raised it. "Niccólo? I believe this is yours."

Nicholas stalked toward Dorian, whose only movement was to follow him with his eyes. Slapping away the book, which clattered to the stone-paved walk of the garden, he stared down at Dorian. "Where is she?"

"She is . . . no more." Dorian leaned down and picked up the book, dusted it off, then placed it gently on the bench. "You should take more care with your things, Niccólo. They break so easily, you know."

His hand moved to the hilt of the light dagger belted to his waist, more in remembered reflex than any conscious threat. "What have you done with her?"

Dorian smiled, then pursed his lips. "The shape of your sword has changed since we last met . . . two centuries ago. Why, it seems like a fortnight, if that." His eyes narrowed. "A pity your manners haven't improved."

He took a step closer. "I asked you a question," snarled Nicholas.

Dorian rose to his feet, less than a hand's width between them. "*I* ask the questions. But . . . I'll answer you, this once." He pointed to his left, deeper into the maze or trellises and flowering bushes. "At dawn, Carlotta was walking in the garden."

Turning his head, Nicholas followed Dorian's gesture, then closed his yes. "No," he whispered. "No!"

"Yes."

He felt his eyes go gold and red, the anger filling him. Nicholas turned on Dorian. "Murderer!"

But Dorian didn't flinch. He met the angry gaze evenly, his own eyes still dark, still pretending to be mortal. "It was her choice and allowed within the Code. I had to honor her decision." Only then did he look down and Nicholas was surprised to see some flicker of sorrow pass over the carefully composed features. "Such a waste of all those centuries, all those memories. She was very old, you know. *Very* old."

Nicholas looked up at the sound of a snarl. Two Enforcers stood in the doorway to the house, skin paler than bleached linen, eyes red-rimmed and filled with gold.

Putting a hand on his shoulder, Dorian pushed past Nicholas, moving to stand before the Enforcers. "It's done?" He paused as one of them nodded. "Good."

"What's done?" asked Nicholas, catching hold of Dorian's doublet and spinning him, so that they faced one another.

"Carlotta's crime has been expunged." He sighed and looked down. "A mortal knew of our existence. He had proof." Dorian's eyes rose, to stare at the Enforcers. "It was the Code. He had to be eliminated."

"You murdered her lover?"

Dorian turned away, walking back to the stone bench. "He was eliminated. As were his wife and children. You can tell—" he gestured with his hand over his shoulder, toward the Enforcers, a note of disgust in his voice. "They seldom smile unless they have the blood of children in their mouths."

In horror, Nicholas stared at the Enforcers—Dorian was right, one was still licking the crimson droplets from his lip. He turned and leaped at Dorian, a furious growl erupting from deep within his chest.

But he overshot the mark. Dorian ducked out of his way, then hit him in the chest as he hurtled past, knocking him into the stone bench. There was a loud crack as he collided with the edge of the bench and he knew several of his ribs were either bruised or broken. But then Dorian returned, placing his knee on the back of Nicholas' neck, pinning him to the bench.

He heard the snarl of the Enforcers, saw the flash of a freshly hewn stake out of the corner of his eye.

But Dorian held up his hand, his eyes staring down at Nicholas. "I've been patient with you because you're still young . . . but my patience is wearing thin. Two and a half centuries is more than old enough to know the Code and to abide by it."

The broken ribs would heal in a matter of hours. For the moment, they were only an annoyance, any discomfort swallowed by the anger that still burned within him. "You've murdered innocents!" Nicholas hissed. "And a sweeter, kinder lady than has ever walked this world!"

Dorian sighed, saying "Chivalry, again!" as he removed his weight from Nicholas' neck. The Enforcers stepped forward as Nicholas pushed himself up from the bench and he moved more slowly, the stake now very visible in the grip of an Enforcer.

"Go," said Dorian, waving them off. "I've no need of you. I can handle this one myself."

The Enforcers snarled again, pausing warily before turning their backs and disappearing into the darkness of the house. Nicholas sat up on the bench. Withdrawing one of his riding gloves from the belt at his waist, he waited for Dorian to turn, then threw it hard against Dorian's chest—or as hard as his broken ribs allowed—saying, "Handle *this*!"

Having the reflexes of a vampire, Dorian caught the glove. He stood, staring down at it for a moment, as if examining the stitching. "Is this a challenge?"

"To a duel of honor."

Smirking, Dorian threw the glove back at him. "I can't duel with one such as you. You have no understanding of Truth—how can you understand her brother, Honor?"

Nicholas let the glove fall to the pavement of the garden path. "I may not be old enough to understand it, but I can see when it's lacking."

"You—!" But Dorian bit back his words. Half-turning, he looked out over the garden. "For this one, you'd fight me? You couldn't have known her long. And she's not of your bloodline."

"She was *innocent*." When Dorian looked back at him, an eyebrow raised, Nicholas added, "Someone must protect them, from you and your kind."

"Yes," said a voice from behind them. "Someone *should* protect innocents and fools. And I seem to have been given that task, for the night." LaCroix stood in the doorway of the house, arms folded across his green velvet doublet. Shaking his head, he stalked past Dorian, grabbed Nicholas by the shoulder and shook him. "Have you taken leave of your senses?"

Nicholas wrenched himself out of LaCroix's grip, still favoring his side. "I've challenged Dorian to a duel of honor."

LaCroix rolled his eyes. "*Have* you?" Then he looked to Dorian. "And . . . you've accepted the challenge?"

"Not yet." Dorian stared down at Nicholas. "I'm still considering."

"Then consider that, as his master, I have the right to fight in his place."

Nicholas struggled to his feet. "I'll fight my own challenges."

The look LaCroix gave him would have withered a mortal to dust. "*Will* you?" He stared at Nicholas, an eyebrow raised, until Nicholas looked away. "I thought not. You do have *some* native intelligence, although where it hides most of the time is beyond me." Turning back to Dorian, he smiled. "Shall we finish what we began, so long ago?"

Dorian met his gaze. "You know the Code. If you killed me, you'd be destroyed by the Enforcers."

"Ah, but that's over an interview. This is a personal challenge . . . which I believe exempts us from reprisals." He paused, still smiling. "Dorian?"

Flinching at the sing-song tone in LaCroix's voice, Dorian turned his head away, looking toward the open doorway to the house.

"You're not certain of the outcome," noted LaCroix. "But that's the eternal nature of war, isn't it? Will you take the challenge?"

Dorian was as stone, unmoving. "Truth will not be served by this."

"Too true." LaCroix looked down, as Nicholas began to speak, hissing, "Be silent."

Only then did Dorian turn, eyeing Nicholas first, then LaCroix. "If I should win," he said softly, "history will lose your memories."

"And should *I* win, we lose all of our history." If possible, the corners of LaCroix's smile grew sharper. "Either way, there *will* be a loss and truth will suffer."

"I've lost enough, this night. I . . . do not accept your challenge." The dark eyes dropped to Nicholas. "Either of your challenges. A challenge shouldn't be accepted from a dishonorable foe." Then he raised his eyes to LaCroix and frowned. "Keep a tighter leash on him, LaCroix. Or the next time we two meet, I'll grind him to dust beneath my boot heel."

"Oh, I should think that would be many years from now." LaCroix looked down at Nicholas. "By then, he may be able to handle you."

"No." Dorian spat on the ground, the eyes he turned to Nicholas filled with nothing but contempt. "He doesn't serve Truth. He could never conquer me." Turning on his heel, Dorian stalked toward the doorway of the house.

Nicholas rose to follow, but LaCroix's hand clamped down on his shoulder. "Stay."

"He killed Carlotta," hissed Nicholas.

LaCroix raised an eyebrow again. "And I'm supposed to be impressed? She walked into the sun, Nicholas."

"To protect her lover and his family." He stared into LaCroix's hard gaze, needing to make him understand, then turned his eyes to the dark doorway, where Dorian and the Enforcers had vanished. "He *killed* them."

"It was the Code."

"Their deaths weren't necessary."

"Their deaths *were* necessary." LaCroix pushed down hard on his shoulder, the same side as his broken ribs, forcing him to sit on the stone bench. "The Code *protects* us. It's inconvenient at times, but that was a foolish thing she did. There are prices to pay when fools do foolish things." He paused, waiting until Nicholas nodded reluctantly. "Good. Now, the wedding celebration is still

on-going." Leaning down, he whispered in Nicholas' ear, "There's fresh blood for the taking."

"No." Picking up the book that had been knocked from the bench, he shook his head. "No—you go. I'll stay here." He ran the flat of his hand against the scuffed leather cover. "Carlotta left me her books. I should go through them before the vultures descend."

"A practical alternative—although you'd do better to look for coins and jewelry, rather than books." Sighing, LaCroix wiped his hands together. "I suppose I'll stay here and have a look, myself."

Nicholas glared up at him. "You're staying here to watch me. To keep me from going after Dorian."

"To keep you from doing as Carlotta did." When Nicholas seemed stunned by the suggestion, he pointed toward the doorway. "Going after Dorian right now would be as pointless an action as hers and have the same result." Leaning down, he placed his hand against Nicholas' shoulder blade, pushing him to his feet. "You'll have your chance, Nicholas. But . . . you must learn to wait for it. With the Enforcers behind him, Dorian's invincible. Without them—and one day his dedication to Truth will leave him bereft of their support and company—he's nothing more than a bookworm with a nasty temper and a long memory. *That's* when you can act. Not before."

Again, Nicholas nodded, hearing some hope in LaCroix's words. As he followed LaCroix into Carlotta's house, he held back his anger and desire for revenge. LaCroix was right—to fight Dorian now would be suicide. He knew enough of tactics to see the possibilities in LaCroix's words. Dorian's day would come.

He had been denied just vengeance, twice. And it lifted his heart somewhat to know that there would not be a third time.

"Detective Knight?"

Nick started, then rose to his feet. The woman standing before him had platinum blonde hair and green eyes—the eyes *so* green he looked into them a little longer than necessary and found colored contact lenses. She might have been in her early forties. The only thing that detracted from the smart style of the silver lamé dress and lace shawl was the large brown leather briefcase she carried.

"Diane Osgood." She held out her hand, shook his, then gestured down at her dress. "Sorry about being so late. And the outfit. I just came from a museum dinner, one of those really dull things, lots of pointless self-congratulatory speeches. But . . . one has to be seen by the right people in the right places."

"I . . . understand," answered Nick.

"I'm sure you do. I saw a notice in the lobby—guess you've got one of those coming up, yourself. I never knew police had to endure those, in addition to crime in the streets. I suppose they're just as boring?"

"Unless a car backfires nearby."

She chuckled. "Right. Guns. Must be quite a sight." Tilting her head, she eyed him thoughtfully. "If you don't mind my asking . . . how can you dance wearing a holster?"

The question caught him by surprise and he shrugged. "I never tried."

"If you *do* find out, let me know." Hefting the briefcase up into both hands, she looked around. "Is there someplace you'd like to hold this interview?"

The word gave him pause. Nick glanced to the rear corridor out of the squad room, then picked up the stack of files from his desk. "I'm relatively certain we've got a briefing room empty." Stepping out from behind his desk, he gestured her down the hall.

"*Briefing* room? That sounds so much better than interrogation room." Her fingers tapped against the leather case. "I think we may need space to spread out some of this stuff, if you need detail on individual pieces."

Nick couldn't help but smile again, as he led her down the hall, to the larger of the two rooms—he wasn't about to tell her that the room changed names, and purposes, as needed. He chose the larger room, although both were empty, because it was lighter, contained several tables, and seemed much less . . . criminal. Placing his hand on the table top, he said, "How about here?" then slid around the other side.

Diane Osgood put the briefcase on the desk, then seated herself. Nick remained standing until she was seated—this was a citizen providing information, after all, and not a suspect under interrogation—then gestured toward the coffee pot at the far end of the room. "Would you like a cup of coffee? It's not all that fresh . . . ."

She wrinkled her nose, then gave him a half-smile as he dropped his own files to the desk. "No thanks. I'm about up to here with coffee," she indicated her chin line with the edge of her hand. "Needed it to get through all those speeches without falling asleep." Flipping open the lock on the briefcase, she peered inside. "I guess this is something like 'I'll show you mine if you show me yours,' right?"

"Something like that." Nick cleared his throat. "How well did you know Alexander Kenko?"

Diane Osgood had withdrawn a ring binder and a file folder from the briefcase, but her hand shook at the last. Her eyes were fixed on the cover of the file, then the interior of the briefcase. "About ten years, more or less. He was one of my first clients. A nice man, generally." Finally, she closed the lid of the case and ran her hand along the cover. Nick suddenly realized that it was only suede, not leather as he'd first thought.

"And your business is—?"

"Is this on the record?"

There was a slight tension in her voice and the green eyes narrowed, as if trying to fix him in place. Nick noted the flutter of her heart. She was nervous. But anyone sitting on the other side of a table, answering perfectly innocent questions, was usually nervous . . . especially

when the police were asking the questions. "No. That's why I appreciate your coming down here, especially at this hour. We need to know something about Kenko's collection, get a handle on what it contained, where it came from, how much it was worth . . . ."

"You mean, like a motive? For murder?"

He shrugged. "Standard procedure. Everything has to be accounted for."

"I suppose." She smiled slightly. "I'm a go-between, an agent. I track down pieces for collectors, attend auctions, that sort of thing." Again, she placed her hand on the briefcase, running it along the suede cover, her eyes slightly unfocused. "I didn't hear about poor Alex until this afternoon, when his daughter, Gloria, called. The viewing's the day after tomorrow. I suppose the funeral's on Saturday."

"And the Estate sale will be in two months?"

Diane Osgood looked up quickly, as if surprised. Then she relaxed, leaning against the back of the chair. "Of course—you'd know Alex specified in his will that I handle the sale. He knew I'd do right by Gloria." Reaching for the file folder, she flipped it open, then turned it toward Nick. "That's the inventory of everything I've sold Alex in the last ten years, with the purchase information—it's all on computer. I think his lawyer holds the provenances on the pieces."

"Even the fakes?"

Again, she seemed surprised. Lowering her eyes, she seemed to look at the list. "I didn't know the police had an ivory expert on call to provide authentications."

"You *were* going to mention they weren't originals before they were auctioned at the Estate sale?"

"As in 'intent to defraud'? I thought you said this wasn't an interrogation room?" Smiling, Diane Osgood seemed to have found what she was looking for—pointing to an item on the list with a well-manicured nail. "Every item is listed for what it is. What it *really* is."

Nick picked up the list and began flipping through it. He'd called it at the crime scene, *every* item in Kenko's collection was a reproduction or a fake. Finished with the listing, he dropped it to the table and raised an eyebrow.

"Alex only *wanted* fakes," she replied, still smiling. "And, what was important to me, he only *bought* fakes."

"Why?"

The question seemed to catch her off-guard. She looked away. "I'm . . . not sure. I'd asked him in the past, but he never really answered." Lost in thought, she hesitated. Then, she opened the ring binder, which contained a combination of inventory sheets and photographs. Slipping one of the photos out of its holder, she passed it along to Nick. "They're *good* fakes, of course. Ranging in value from the mid-1700 pieces that came from the around the Rhine, right through the counterfeit ivory glut in England in the mid 1800's."

"Yes, I remember," Nick said absently, as he looked at the photo of a depiction in ivory of the Annunciation. Then he looked up quickly. "I remember . . . reading about it."

"Art history courses?" asked Diane Osgood. "In college?"

There was just enough professional snideness in her tone to cause him to smile. "Living history," he answered, going back to the photo.

"Then you know they're not 'fakes'—not to us. We call them 'unauthorized reproductions.' Half the museums in the world have been weeding these things out of their permanent collections . . . and they've still missed some. Alex went on a crusade against the Toronto Museum two years ago, after he spotted a reproduction labeled as 'real' in their collection."

Nick smiled at her choice of words, then turned the notebook of photos toward him, replacing the picture. "I suppose that made him very popular in the community."

"Oh, they hated him. He had this thing about them labeling *anything* as real. He started out as a claims investigator, for his insurance company. Finding fraud was a way of life for him. And he was the best they had. They kept moving him upstairs." She sighed. "Somewhere along the way, he went from trying to weed out fraud to trying to save the company money. Not to speak ill of the dead, but . . . ." She waited for Nick to meet her eyes. "I think he actually *enjoyed* turning down claims. Especially legitimate claims. Maybe it was some sort of power trip . . . being able to decide what was real and what wasn't?" She shrugged, glancing down at the book. "Then he's killed by a burglar for a fake. I don't suppose . . . do you know what was taken?"

"We were hoping you could tell us," explained Nick. Pausing, he pulled out the inventory list and photo folder from his own pile of files. "His daughter wasn't familiar enough with the collection."

"And I am." Diane Osgood nodded. "Yeah, I can probably tell you if something's missing. I was at his place the day before it happened. But I guess you know that."

Nick never made a movement to let her think otherwise. She leaned forward to pick up the inventory sheets, flipped to the last page, then handed it to him. "He asked me to pick up a medieval triptyph with ivory figures—it's similar to one in the British museum, down to the gold leaf."

"A fake?"

While he looked at the inventory sheet, she turned to the end of the photo album, then tapped her finger on the plastic holder. "That's one of the authentication photos. I never got a chance to deliver it. And Alex never paid me." Sighing, she leaned back in her chair again. "I *could* get the estate to pay for it, verbal contract and all that. Maybe I'll keep it. Something to remember him by."

From the two photos, Nick judged the wooden housing of the triptych to be about three feet high. The ivories depicted the life of Christ, the central and largest section being the crucifixion. He'd gotten better at dealing with crosses, but . . . he concentrated on the other parts of the triptych, like the gold leaf interior and the painted

outer panels, which formed a picture when the leaves of the triptych were closed.

"Would it be possible to bring it in sometime?" asked Nick. "With the paperwork?"

Diane Osgood seemed surprised at his interest. "It's not particularly valuable—or fragile—but I don't know about bringing it over here."

"It's a beautiful piece. I'd like to look at it, if you wouldn't mind."

"Well, if it's *personal* interest . . . ?" She shrugged, some of the hesitation leaving her. "I can bring it by."

"Good." Smiling, Nick placed the scene photos and inventory file on the table and opened it. "Do you have time to go over the inventory lists with me?"

"Sure. I'm used to keeping late nights." Reaching for the photo book and her own inventory list, she flipped to the beginning. "Let's get started."

It took nearly two hours to match the inventory photos to the sales photos Diane Osgood had maintained for her records. The number and description of the pieces matched . . . except for the quality of a few.

Nick picked up the sales photo. "Four chess pieces, mint condition—" Then he picked up the crime scene photo, which showed the same pieces. "Three chess pieces in mint condition. One . . . mangled."

"You can see, I didn't sell it to him like that," said Osgood quickly. "That's why I take the provenance photos before I turn over the pieces, and have them notarized." She took the photo from Nick's hand and winced. "It was a gorgeous piece, too. A bishop, with such fine detail . . . ."

There was a note of sadness in her voice. Then she quickly dropped the photo and smiled. "Oh . . . right. I remember now." She met Nick's eyes. "Alex said he was re-labling some of his collection and left them out. The cleaning lady knocked this one off the table and it got caught in her vacuum."

There was a skip in her heartbeat. Nick stared into her eyes, then back down at the photo. "That's odd. It doesn't look like that type of damage. In fact, this seems deliberate."

The laugh was false as well. "Why would Alex mutilate a fake? Especially a piece in a condition like that? No," she said firmly. "It was an accident. And . . . it's getting late." Diane Osgood pushed back her chair and stood. Gesturing at the inventory and photos, she said, "You can keep the inventory. I'd like the photos back. They're a second set but I hate to lose my backup copy. If you need to call, I should be in tomorrow by—" she glanced down at her watch and frowned, "—not before two."

Nick rose to his feet and nodded. "Thanks for coming in. And if anyone calls, it won't be me—it'll be my partner, Detective Schanke."

She paused, her hand grasping the briefcase handle, but not lifting it from the table. "This isn't your case?"

"I've got . . . a few days off."

"Lucky you." Smiling, she put her other hand on the case, holding it against her chest. "I guess you'll be able to sleep in, too."

He shrugged. "You might say that."

"Who's the lucky lady? Not that it matters." She reached forward and shook his hand. "Nice to have met you, Detective. You have any questions—about *anything*—you give me a call. I'll show myself out."

"I will," Nick promised. "Thanks." He watched her leave the room, then sat down in the chair and sighed. Schanke was going to look like road kill after dealing with Diane Osgood, if it came to that. Now that they'd determined nothing had been stolen, the smash-and-grab theory was out the window, allowing for the fact that the murderer might have panicked and fled. But it still didn't seem . . . right.

Picking up the photo of the mangled chess piece, Nick compared it against to the original sales photo and shook his head in disgust. Osgood was right—it had been a gorgeous piece. He could almost imagine it in his hands, the hills and valleys of the features and the carving, as it was lifted and moved across a chessboard in a tiny war. The question was why she bothered to lie about how the bishop had been damaged. The scoring wasn't mechanical, but haphazard, as if done with a heavy, sharp knife.

He stared at the photo, trying to come up with an answer, but nothing made sense. Osgood admitted the damage had been done before the murder, which meant that the murderer hadn't deliberately killed Kenko, then gone after this particular piece, or any of the others that seemed to have been damaged. That left Kenko. But why would a collector deliberately deface a piece from his own collection? Especially a piece that was so well tooled, that it might be taken as real, instead of fake?

Unless . . . the piece *had* been real?

Hurriedly gathering together the photos of the chess piece and the triptych, Nick ran from the room and back to the hallway. Seeing Stonetree's door open, he glanced inside. The Captain was seated at his desk, a number of files open, a pen in his hand.

Nick tapped quickly on the doorjamb and then walked in. Stonetree looked up, nodded his greeting, then looked back to the form he was filling out. "Nick. What can I do for you?"

"I want a search warrant."

That got Stonetree's attention. Eyes glittering, he looked up. "The smash-and-grab from last night?"

"*Not* a smash-and-grab. *Or* pre-meditated murder." He hesitated. "I just talked to Diane Osgood—Kenko's purchasing agent? She was supposed to deliver a piece to him. She says she was there the day before the murder, but she never dropped the piece off." He handed Stonetree the photograph. "I think she took it over there last night. They had an argument—"

"And Osgood killed him?"

"My take is that it was an accident. I went by the Coroner's Office earlier. Nat—" He stopped, then stared

down at the desk—now was the time for business. "Nat gave me a demonstration on how she thinks Kenko fell. He was either pushed or slipped, then cracked his skull on the furniture."

"How much backup you got on this?"

"Her fingerprints at the crime scene—but she's been there before." Running a hand through his hair, Nick walked away, waving the photos he still held in his other hand. "We might want to talk to the neighbors again."

"You got an ID from them, putting her there at the time of the murder?"

"No. But they might be used to seeing Osgood come and go from Kenko's place, so they'd never think to mention it, unless we asked specifically."

"Have Schanke do it, first thing." Sighing, Stonetree leaned back in his chair. "But a theory and a possible ID isn't enough for a warrant."

"*That* might be." Returning to the desk, he pointed at the photo of the triptych. "That's the piece Osgood was supposed to deliver. She says he never received it. But if we dust it and come up with Kenko's fingerprints—we prove she lied. And if she lied about that—"

"That's enough for probable cause?"

"If it's backed up by the autopsy results." Again, he reached down to the photograph. "That's gold leaf—it'll leave trace elements on the fingers if he touched it. Which means Nat'll have to do a metal series on the hands."

Stonetree met his eyes. "You think Osgood'll try to dump the evidence?"

"I don't know." Turning, Nick thought back to the interview. "I think she came in to find out how much we knew. I might have spooked her. If I leave her a message—the general 'thanks for cooperating' speech—it might put her at ease. She might try to take the prints off the piece . . . but she'd be careful with it, especially if I'm right."

"About what?"

"Kenko collected fakes and only fakes." Nick moved to the desk and handed Stonetree the pictures of the ivory bishop. "Osgood dropped off her provenance pictures—that's before Kenko touched it. The second," he couldn't help but wince, seeing the disfigured bishop, "is our scene photo. Osgood thought she'd sold him a fake, but it was real. So he destroyed it."

Stonetree's eyes narrowed and he picked up the picture of the triptych. "So, this was supposed to be a fake. And . . . it's real, too?"

"Maybe. Or maybe just part of it." Nick shrugged. "You'd have to get someone to authenticate it. But she's not going to dump something that valuable if we make her think she's got nothing to worry about."

"That's a hell of a motive for murder . . . or accidental homicide." Stonetree picked up the photos and handed them back to him. "Let's go with it. You're off tomorrow, right? Schanke can do the follow-through on this one. If we can get the autopsy evidence."

"Taking care of that right now." Photos in hand, Nick left the office and headed for his desk. Throwing the pictures onto the blotter, he dialed, picked up the receiver and leaned against his typewriter. This was business. He could handle business. Nat would talk to him. She *had* to.

The phone rang once. "Toronto County Coroner's Office."

"Grace, this is Nick—"

"Yes, detective." He winced at the chill in her voice. "If you're looking for the Kenko autopsy, it's on its way over."

"Actually, I need to talk to Nat."

"She's not in right now. Would you like me to leave her a message?"

The voice was official, methodical, and distant. Nick took a breath. "Grace . . . I'm calling to apologize. I *really* need to talk to her."

"She's left for the night. Nick, I'm sorry. If she knew you were going to call—"

"That's okay. We need a metal series on Kenko's hands, specifically looking for traces of gold leaf. Can you get someone on it?"

"Hell, yeah. It's like a tomb over here." She chuckled. "But a slow night for us is good for everybody else."

"Yeah. I guess you're right." Nick smiled, hearing the echo of his earlier conversation with Norma. "Thanks, Grace. I'll try Nat at home."

"Uh—wait! Nick?"

He'd been ready to hang up, when his exceptional hearing caught Grace's comment. "What?"

"Nick, she's not--Nat asked me to drop by her place and feed Sidney tonight, on my way home."

At first, it didn't sink in. So Natalie wasn't going home . . . where was she going?

"And . . . tomorrow."

Nick closed his eyes. "Grace, I know I shouldn't put you in this spot, but it's very important I know. Did Natalie leave by herself? Or was . . . someone with her?"

He expected the pause. Grace was Natalie's friend and co-worker, while Nick was little more than a distant third on the list, if that. She could justifiably tell him to go to hell.

Grace cleared her throat. "In order—no, yes. And . . . yes."

"I haven't asked—"

"But you were going to. Yes, it was the guy who was here tonight."

"Dorian."

"Like I said, she didn't think you'd call back. If you'd only called a half-hour ago . . . . Nick, I'm sorry."

"So am I." Trying to keep the fear and disappointment from his voice, he added, "Thanks. Thanks for being honest with me."

Nick dropped the receiver to the desk, then reached behind and placed it in the cradle. Natalie had left with Dorian. He'd waited too long to call. He was too late.

But then, that's the way it had always been with Dorian. He was always too late.

"Nick?"

He looked up at the sound of Vivian's voice. She stood in the squad room doorway, a hesitant smile on her face. "I'm not too late, am I?"

Wincing at the words, he looked around—even on the tail end of the night shift, there were too many people here. And he'd left the photos in the interrogation room . . .. Nick gestured for her to follow him.

Vivian hurried to keep pace with him, catching up with him in the hall. "What's happened?"

"I called the Coroner's Office. Natalie's not there." Saying the words only seemed to make it worse, turned the lump of ice in his chest to lead. Entering the conference room, he walked to the table and began to shove things hurriedly into files, not paying attention to the rhyme or reason. What was the point? Schanke could straighten it out tomorrow.

Vivian paused in the doorway. "Dorian?"

He nodded, ever so slightly, still intent on the paperwork on the desk. Vivian walked over to him and placed a comforting hand on his arm. "She wouldn't have gone with him willingly."

"It doesn't make a difference. I have to find her. She has no idea how much danger she's in." Leaning on the more-or-less even pile of evidence, he pressed his hands down against it. "Where *is* Dorian?"

"I don't know."

Nick looked up quickly and Vivian took a step back. *"Really!"* she protested. "I was supposed to drop off the time and place for the interview, then meet him. He was going to take me to the new place." Shaking her head, she sighed. "But I didn't go back. I *couldn't* go back."

Her fear was a presence in the room. Nick put his hand on her shoulder, needing her to focus. *"Where* were you supposed to meet him?"

"The parking lot, in the underground mall. I was supposed to pick up some clothes for him there. He was going to find a place on his own, then come to get me." She swallowed. "Nick, he had a lot of cash on him. He could be *anywhere*."

"No. Not *anywhere*. He has to make it to the interview tomorrow, on time, or he loses his chance at me. And that is—?"

Vivian handed him a slip of gray paper. "Here."

"Eight." He looked up from the paper. Sunset would be about six, which meant that Dorian would have a little less than two hours traveling time to drive or fly to—

Nick felt his heart stop as he looked at the paper again, the address stirring memories within him. It was a gray place, with vats of blood and animal carcasses. Quiet, at night. There'd be no witnesses, no eavesdroppers.

Not like the last time he was there.

Closing his eyes, Nick leaned on the edge of the table. It had been LaCroix. After so many years, they'd met again. Words echoed in his brain, bits of conversation—*'How long is the longest friendship?' 'You can't deny what you are.' 'You don't have the courage.'* Alyce's scream. The shattering of the cup . . . it was all so crystal clear in his perfect memory. Even the memory of the scent of stale blood . . . and the sound of metal bar cutting through LaCroix's chest.

Dorian had chosen well. It was a place of false death.

"Do you know where it is?" asked Vivian.

"Yes." Clearing his throat, Nick opened his eyes and turned toward her, knowing that he couldn't show her his fear, his anger. She needed security, composure, protection. "Yes," he repeated, crumpling the paper in his hand. "I remember it well." He almost tossed the paper away, but stopped himself. It was important that it not be found, that no one be able to trace him there, in case—

Swallowing, Nick put the crumpled paper on top of the files and carefully smoothed it out with his hand. "It's a . . . gray place. An abattoir."

"A slaughterhouse?" Vivian's voice rose into panic at the end of the question. She grabbed his arm. "Nick, you've gotta run."

"I have to find Natalie." He stared down at the paper.

"In *daylight?*"

He looked up at her, knowing that she was right. Clothing would give him only temporary protection from the sun, but he couldn't act, couldn't think, while he was in so much danger. A two hour radius from the abattoir was a large area to search. There was no way to find her before the interview. No way.

"Run," whispered Vivian.

Giving her a wan smile, he reached a hand to her cheek, touching it lightly, then moved past her. "No."

"Then go somewhere safe. Not your apartment." She touched his shoulder, to get his attention. "The Raven?"

Again, he shook his head. "No. If he's going to condemn me, anyone who helps me is forfeit. I won't endanger Janette."

"Then . . . where else can you go?

Nick stared at her over his shoulder, her words echoing in his brain. He had no bolt-hole here—never needed one before. His loft, the Raven, the station—that was the length and breadth of his world. Natalie's place . . . no, he couldn't bear that. And Grace would get the surprise of her life, if she awakened him when she came in to feed Sidney.

The thought made him smile, but he sobered almost instantly, meeting Vivian's concerned gaze. "There *is* nowhere else."

Suddenly, something seemed to change in her—her eyes lost the look of fear and became more confident. She drew herself to her full height, picked up his files from the table, then turned back to him. "We'll find you a safe place, even if you have to spend the day in the trunk of your car." For a moment, she looked away, clicking her tongue against her teeth. "A motel or hotel would be

best, somewhere your car couldn't be spotted. And we'll need cash . . . ?" Only then did she look back to him. "Sorry, but I'm down to a couple of bucks."

Nick stared at her, amazed, then it hit him—Vivian was doing her job. And her job had been taking care of a vampire. "I—uh—have some cash on me."

"Good." She tilted her head, eyeing him critically. "You'll need to feed. We can probably get some from the Raven . . . Dorian couldn't hold Janette responsible for common charity."

"I'm fine."

"No, you're *not*." Showing sudden backbone, she frowned at him. "I know Dorian tanks up before an interview. You'd better do the same."

He smiled at her choice of phrasing. "I don't suppose you've eaten anything today, either?"

For a second, that competent facade flickered—now it was her turn to be surprised. And Nick wondered, not for the first time, how much attention Dorian paid to the needs of the mortals who attended him. "Thanks—I *am* hungry. But I can catch a bite after you're settled in for the day. As long as there's a deli in the neighborhood that delivers, I'm okay. And we should get going."

Nick tried to pry the files away from her, but she held onto them tightly. Giving up, he led her out of the interrogation room and back to his desk. There were more people around—the shifts were changing.

It was time to go. The sun would be rising in an hour, or less. If he did as Vivian suggested, stopping at a motel, he could call Schanke and update him on the Kenko case. But there was still Vivian to deal with.

"You don't have to be my bodyguard," whispered Nick, glancing down at her. "You could take the car."

Vivian placed the files on Schanke's desk, then smiled up at him. "And leave you defenseless?" She placed her arm through his, as they headed for the door. "I'll watch over you."

Pausing in the lobby, he carefully slipped out of her grasp, sandwiching her hand in his for a moment. "Vivian, I don't *need* anyone to watch over me. I know it's fairly common practice for some, but I've never—"

Reaching up with her free hand, she placed a finger to his lips, stopping his words. "Then how do you know, if you've never tried?" Her fingers intertwined with his, as she clasped his hand. "Maybe it's time you picked up the habit. It's nice to be taken care of, now and again."

It was nearly impossible to argue with her. Some very small part in him felt a flicker of pity for Dorian—if he didn't know better, he'd think this mortal had wound the vampire around her little finger so tightly that he'd never get loose. But then, she was the servant, after all. She was the one trying to escape.

Still, he rolled his eyes and relented, following Vivian out the door. The last thing Nick saw in the station, before the doors closed behind him, was Norma. Hands on hips, she glared at him from the other side of the information desk, wearing a look that could have turned a mounted regiment of Hungarian hussars to full retreat.

CHAPTER TEN

HER MIND fuzzy with sleep, Natalie blinked at the darkness. The closing of a car door still echoed in her ears. Turning her head, she looked to the driver's side and found it empty.

The car had been parked in a small garage or vehicle bay. Unhooking her seat belt, she opened the passenger side door, then slipped between the wall of the garage and the car, making her way to the large, open door through which they'd entered.

The sun had risen. Dorian was trying to close the door from a shadowed side. Grabbing the door in the middle and shutting it would have exposed him to the sunlight. He wasn't having any luck and she heard him muttering comments in a language she didn't need translated to understand.

"Let me," she sighed, grabbing the overhead door and rolling it down into place. It was wood, without windows. Once it was closed, the garage fell into complete darkness. Knowing it would take a moment for her eyes to adjust, Natalie stood where she was, afraid that she might trip over some tools or, God forbid, a spare garden hose. She let out a short cry, as something touched her arm.

"I'm sorry," said Dorian. "Sometimes, I forget mortal limitations."

"It's all right." Natalie could see shapes in the darkness, but not much more. "If the sun's up—how close did we cut it?"

"I'll have to compliment the car manufacturers on the window tint—we did very well. But in another three minutes, I was going to stop the car, crawl into the trunk, and direct you from there. Hardly dignified, but it would have worked well enough." His voice moved away and she heard a click—faintly reminiscent of a padlock snapping shut? "This place seems safe." Then, she realized he was suddenly standing beside her again, felt his gaze on her. "Perhaps this wasn't a good idea."

"This place isn't safe?"

"I meant . . . you're being here."

She touched his arm. "I'm a volunteer, not a hostage."

"Nick doesn't know that."

"He wouldn't care." But her words were betrayed by the uncertainty in her tone.

"I think he would. A great deal." Taking her arm, he led her over to the car, which was a dark shape against the blackness. Dorian opened the driver's side door and the small light inside the car shone like a beacon. Reaching into his jacket pocket, he took out the keys, which he placed in her hand, closing her fingers over them. "Take the car. Go back to your apartment . . . or Nick. You shouldn't be here."

Natalie took the keys from the palm of his gloved hand, then held his hand flat against the palm of her own. "You'd be alone."

"I'll manage."

This time, *his* voice betrayed him. "Be careful, Dorian. That was very close to being a lie." When he frowned, she chuckled. "I promised I'd stay," she said, rapping her knuckles lightly against his suit jacket. "And I will. Or do you want to make a liar out of *me*?"

"Thank you." Reaching into the car, Dorian pulled her medical bag from the floor, then her purse, which he handed to her. Once the car door was closed, there was no light. Dorian grabbed for her hand in the darkness. "This way."

In the brief light from the car interior, Natalie had recognized the garage for what it was—an automotive repair bay. It hadn't been too long abandoned—oil slicks dotted the floor, still shiny, occasional rainbows forming on the surface in the reflected light. Most of the heavy equipment had been removed, but the floor was pock-marked, chunks missing from the concrete. She was just as happy to have Dorian guiding her through the darkness across that automotive no man's land.

Dorian paused at one point, leaning away from her. Lights appeared on the other side of an open doorway. Gesturing with a hand, he indicated that she should enter first.

The room had a concrete floor, a high ceiling, and cinderblock walls. Small windows along the top had been covered with thick black duct tape, so no stray ray of light entered. There was a door at the far side, with a counter—this would have been the outer office. Another door was on her right. Several grocery bags, packages, and small boxes sat on the counter. A card table and two folding chairs stood beyond that. Just inside the counter was a king sized mattress, with sheets, pillows, and blankets.

There was a click and Natalie turned—to see Dorian padlock the door behind her. For some reason, she shivered, especially when she saw that the other exit was padlocked from the inside. He walked past her, to the counter. "We've electricity, as you can see—there are a separate set of lights by the table, should you want to read while I'm sleeping. The restroom's there—" he gestured toward the unlocked door to her right, "and it's relatively disinfected, but no shower or bath facilities, I'm afraid."

Natalie walked to stand beside him, putting her medical bag and purse on the counter. Dorian opened a box and withdrew an electric drip coffee pot, while another contained mugs, paper plates, and various plastic utensils. "I'm usually better at entertaining than this. Vivian manages . . . everything."

His eyes darkened when he mentioned Vivian's name and he quickly busied himself with the boxes. For her own part, Natalie dug into the grocery bags, which contained an odd assortment of luncheon meats and cheese, two loaves of French bread, a six-pack of diet cola, and a number of bags of snacks, mostly popcorn. "This is great. But, do you have any clue as to how much mortals eat, on average?"

Dorian's hesitant expression proved just how limited his knowledge of the mortal world might be. Natalie laughed at his wry smile. "I'll take that as a 'no.' Just for the next time, about half of this would have been fine. But it's always best not to skimp on the popcorn."

"I'll remember," promised Dorian, solemnly. He tumbled an odd assortment of paperbacks from another bag, one of which Natalie rescued as it skidded off the counter. "I grabbed a bit of everything, not knowing your taste. And about that—" He sighed, staring down at the bed. "I hope you won't take offense—I thought Vivian would be here. Not to worry, I've slept on the floor before."

"None of this gallantry crap," warned Natalie, holding up her hand to stop him. "You take the bed. I'll take a chair. After all, you'll be the one sleeping."

"Don't be too certain." Dorian walked around the counter and fell into one of the folding chairs, beside the table. He held up his hands, in a helpless gesture. "I'm sorry. I wasn't prepared for this."

"It's all right—"

"No, it's not. You see, Vivian takes care of all the details. She takes care of—"

"You," supplied Natalie.

"Yes. I suppose she does." He leaned his head on his arms on the top of the card table, then closed his eyes. "They always have."

Grabbing her medical bag and, as an afterthought, a can of soda and a bag of popcorn, Natalie moved to the table. Once there, she opened her medical case and removed packages of sterile dressing and a small scissors. "Let's take a look at your hands before you fall asleep, okay?"

Dorian sat back in the chair and let his hands rest lightly on the table. Natalie removed the glove carefully from his left hand, shifting her chair so that she'd be closer to him—she'd have cut it off him, but didn't know if she'd need it again. The light dressing she applied to keep the burns clean seemed not to have shifted too much during the evening. In fact, they fell away easily enough when she cut through them. The skin underneath was lightly scarred, but relatively whole.

She looked up at him, curious. Dorian held up his hand, examining it. "I've had quite a bit to drink this

evening," he replied. "The healing is always faster and cleaner if we feed heavily and frequently."

Natalie was half-way through cutting the second glove, when he mentioned feeding. She looked over her shoulder, to the counter, but there was no sign of any 'wine' bottles.

"In a cooler, behind the counter," said Dorian, smiling when she met him eyes. "I know how disturbing it can be."

"I appreciate your concern, but I'm used to it." Holding up the scissors, she clicked the ends together. "Occupational hazard. Blood *isn't* a problem."

"Vivian seems to have the same immunity to squeamishness. She says it comes from having worked on too many low-budget gore movies." As the bandages fell away, Dorian examined his other hand, which was in even better shape. "My compliments, Dr. Lambert. I doubt Vivian could have done as well."

Tossing the used gauze to one side, Natalie repacked the rest of her supplies in her bag, now that they were unnecessary. "I told you, Nick won't hurt her."

"But what will *she* do . . . without me?"

There was a lost look in his eyes, before he turned away. For a moment, Natalie couldn't identify what it was. Popping the top from her soda can, she stared down as the brown liquid bubbled up through the small hole, then settled back again. "Dorian, it's not like Vivian's *left* you. Has she?"

He shook his head quickly. "No. She's devoted to me. Our only point of contention is that I refuse to bring her across. That's not what I—" Those dark eyes met hers. "What has Nick told you about me?"

There were a few problems dealing with someone who placed value on truth and Natalie ran smack into one. If Nick and Dorian would be facing off tomorrow, the last thing she wanted to do was make the situation worse for Nick. But not answering would be as bad as outright lying. "He said you were a killer. A murderer."

Dorian clapped his fresh, pink hands together. "Guilty as charged, as are we all. I've killed mortals to survive. For the blood. For centuries." He shrugged. "It's part of what we do, most of what we are."

Something churned in Natalie's stomach—that knot was starting up again. But she forced it back down, forced herself to meet his eyes. "I know. I can't accept it. Or approve of it. But . . . I understand."

"I don't think you do. If you did, you wouldn't *be* here." His eyes narrowed, as he stared at her for a moment, then looked away. "I've killed many, many mortals, Dr. Lambert. But I've never killed one of my own kind before. Not like this."

A shiver went down her spine. He was talking about *killing* Nick. But, if he hadn't killed *before* . . . . "Really?"

Dorian nodded, then frowned. "Only once. Just after I was brought across. I was . . . an accident. A meal that came back to life because the fool hadn't been a vampire long enough to know of the Code, or the rules, or what he was about. A lone traveler, with scholarly intent, a small house in the city, a handful of servants." Leaning his head on his hand, he looked across the room and she knew that he was seeing the past.

"And when was this?"

A smile slipped across his lips and his eyelids flickered. "You *are* persistent, aren't you?"

"I've learned to get my shots in when I can."

"I'd imagine, having dealt with Nick myself." When she frowned, he looked away again. "I knew enough of folklore to know what I'd become and what my limitations were. I took my 'master' back to the city, to my house. I told the servants I'd been ill, had them make the house safe for me, protect me from the sun. They were loyal. My only family."

Natalie cleared her throat. "I take it you didn't have any . . . outside interests?"

"I was a philosopher." Dorian chuckled beneath his breath. "Which meant I wasn't a prize catch. Nor did my work leave me any time for . . . outside interests, as you call them. There wasn't *time* for social gatherings, or those tedious dinners."

"Tell me about it," she commiserated, opening the bag of popcorn.

Again, he chuckled. "Ah, yes. Work is a wonderful excuse for self-imposed exile, isn't it? The world, and its people haven't changed much in—" He gave her a cautious look. "What's your current estimate of my age?"

"Five hundred BC. Or thereabouts."

Dorian's eyes narrowed, and he looked away. "Let's settle for 'centuries.'"

"Spoilsport."

"I'm tired. And . . . I'm old." Dorian rose to his feet and gave her a slight bow. "If you'll excuse me, Dr. Lambert."

Natalie stood, but he'd already walked around the counter. Flopping down on the mattress, Dorian closed his eyes, but she leaned on the counter top. "You can't stop there. You have to tell me what happened."

"I killed him." Lying on his side, on the mattress, he turned away from her. "I came home one night and found he'd slaughtered my servants. I don't know why. He'd fed, so it wasn't hunger. Perhaps he was jealous, resented the way they cared for me." Dorian's voice grew low, so low she almost couldn't hear him. "I destroyed him. And then, the Enforcers came."

As Natalie walked around the counter, Dorian opened his eyes and sat up, watching her. "*That's* how I became the Archivist—they were looking for someone to take the position. I've never killed another of my kind since then. Nor have I ever had courage enough to bring another across." He managed a weary chuckle, falling back on his elbows. "So, I suppose I *will* be the last of my line, after all."

"Nick said . . . there were others. That you turned them in to the Enforcers?"

"*Do* sit down, Mouse-Mouse." Moving over on the

mattress, Dorian patted the spot beside him. "Here, if you like."

He hadn't answered her question. Nor did Natalie think he was going to. There was a note of challenge in his tone, or was it bait? Come here, little girl, and I'll give you a piece of candy . . . .

Still, she moved closer, then sat on the edge of the mattress, farthest from him. "The others?"

"Yes," admitted Dorian, frowning. Leaning back, he covered his eyes with his arm. "But I never killed them myself. I'll admit to torture, brutality, rape—" he peered out at her, beneath his arm, "—but that was some time ago. Those were dark days. As a mortal, I'd never lived. As a vampire I lived too hard and too fast and too well. I won't pretend that I regret what I did. It was necessary . . . in context. And I dare say your Nicholas committed more than his share of brutality, as LaCroix's shadow."

Natalie looked away, biting her lip. Nick never talked about those days, those times. He'd mentioned trying to tempt Joan of Arc—the idea that only *he* would try something like that made her smile—but what went before that time was only . . . darkness. Out of respect, she'd avoided asking. But now . . . what did she *really* know about him?

Suddenly, Dorian was sitting beside her, his arm around her shoulder. "I'm sorry," he said quickly. "Forgive me. That shouldn't have been said."

She stared at him, meeting his gaze. "You're a bully. That's what you are, just a bully! Oh, it was all right when you had the Enforcers to back you up. You pushed the others around. And if they pushed back, the Enforcers were there to protect you, right?" When he didn't reply, she shrugged out from under his arm, then punched him in the chest. "Answer me."

"Yes." He sneaked a look at her, saw the anger in her eyes, and looked down again, hanging his head. "But they won't protect me, now. Some time ago, they asked me for information, which I gave them—it's part of the Code. They convicted and sentenced a vampire, using it."

"You've ratted on others before."

But Dorian turned his head, meeting her gaze. And his dark eyes were again wide . . . and lost. "They *lied*. They falsified the evidence. They took my truth and distorted it, used it to convict an innocent vampire . . . if any of us are innocent."

"Why?"

"Who knows? But I cut them off. They've had no access to the archives since then. And they can't force me to give it to them. Since then, they've condemned others without letting me interview them—so many memories lost!" He shrugged and gave her a half-hearted smile. "I told you, I was railroaded into the job. One of the concessions I received is that I'm personally exempt from sections of the Code . . . as well as part of it. Whoever destroys me gets a choice—be destroyed by the Enforcers in turn or become the next Archivist. Truthfully, I'd chose the former."

Natalie stared at him. "But that means the *Enforcers* may have tried to kill you. The gas, the stake—"

"They wouldn't have risked it. They're bound by the Code. And I doubt any one of them wants me badly enough to sacrifice himself or end up with my job for the rest of eternity. But I don't doubt they've found someone willing to do it *for* them. Perhaps someone who doesn't know the Code as well as he might?"

"Nick wouldn't work for the Enforcers!"

"He's a *police detective*, Dr. Lambert. In the mortal world, he serves the same function. He *is* an Enforcer." Sighing, Dorian moved back up the mattress. "Perhaps you're right. He always did have that chivalrous streak in him. But it wouldn't stop them from using him. He destroys me, they destroy him . . . and it's done. Two vampires with one stake and a minimum of fuss."

It was starting to make sense. Nick didn't believe in conspiracies, which was why they'd barely made it through *JFK*. She'd never really asked him about the gas attack—although he wouldn't tell her why he'd gone out in the daylight—and the stake in the rental car . . . .

"Dorian?" When Natalie turned, he was lying on his back, arm over his eyes again. She scurried across the mattress and shook him. "Dorian? Nick doesn't know that you were attacked. Either time. It *was* the Enforcers. They've set him up."

Dorian murmured sleepily. When she shook him again, he let his arm fall from his eyes and stared up at her with a bleary gaze. "What?"

"We can talk to Nick. We can *stop* this."

"You told me yourself, he wants me dead. He holds me responsible for . . . well, some things I did." Dorian's eyes closed. "I'm not a fighter. I'm not trained, as he is. Oh, I know enough to stand against him, but not for long."

"Tell him that!"

His eyes flickered open, and he raised his head, resting his weight on his elbow. "Do you really think he'll listen to me?" When she didn't answer, Dorian fell back against the pillow. "No. He won't. For all of his changes, there's some part of him that's still a brute, more a bully that I ever was. He'll beat me senseless in the name of honor, and then he'll drive a stake into my heart and think he's won . . . until the Enforcers track him down and give him the ultimatum." Sighing, he closed his eyes. "No, it's no use. Once he realizes he can kill me, he *will*. It will be lost. It will *all* be lost." He chuckled, then the laugh turned into a yawn. "When I'm dead, Dr. Lambert . . . tell him that. He may do the honorable thing and walk into the sun, when he learns the truth."

"Dorian? Tell him *what*?"

Natalie leaned closer and he yawned again, turning his back to her. "I'm the . . . Archivist. *And* the . . . archives. Perfect . . . memory. No records. I'm . . . the archives . . . ." His voice trailed off, into sleep.

She thought about trying to wake him again, but stopped herself. Between the gas attack, the sun burns,

the stake, and losing Vivian, Dorian was exhausted. It was amazing that he'd stayed awake this long. And she'd known Nick, in the past, to sleep well past sunset when he was stressed out. Maybe, if she didn't disturb him, he'd just continue sleeping. There was probably something in the Code about Dorian not showing up for an interview. At worst, it would be postponed, while at best it might be canceled.

The thought cheered her. Rising carefully from the mattress, Natalie paused just long enough to tuck a blanket around Dorian—who'd fallen asleep in his suit jacket, of all things—then walked around the counter, to the table. Picking up a handful of popcorn, she munched quietly on the kernels, washing them down with sips of Coke.

The light switch was on the other wall, where they'd entered. Carrying the bag of popcorn and the Coke, she headed toward the light switch. The least she could do for Dorian was let him sleep in the dark. The locked doors meant that she couldn't leave—not without waking Dorian while trying to find the keys or making a racket trying to pry the padlock off the doors. And even if she *did* get the doors open and headed for a phone to contact Nick, she had no idea where they were. Anyone could wander in, leave a door open, let the daylight through . . . and that would be the end of Dorian.

Besides, she'd promised to stay the day, to watch over him. And she would.

Hand on the switch, Natalie paused, glancing over her shoulder. Dorian *was* just like Nick . . . they looked so helpless, so harmless when they were asleep. But a memory of flashing fangs and gold eyes caused her to shudder—it was always better to keep in mind just what they were and how dangerous they could be.

She turned out the light, then made her way carefully through the darkness. Her first intention was to return to the folding chair, but when she lost half her bag of popcorn falling over Dorian's cooler, Natalie settled for the mattress. Sitting there, in the dark, eating popcorn and drinking Diet Coke, she leaned against Dorian's back and wondered how on Earth she was going to keep one of those two innocent looking sleepers from killing the other.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

UTTER DARKNESS surrounded him. He could see odd things, things that didn't belong to his life or his loft. Nick drew a breath and started, not knowing where he was.

"Ssssh!" whispered a soft voice, from beside him. "It was only a bad dream. Go back to sleep."

It was a dream. He was still dreaming. Closing his eyes, Nick let his head fall back against the pillow. But the sheets and pillowcase seemed rough against his skin. And the voice—?

Again, he shot up, this time out of bed. It wasn't his bed, wasn't his couch, wasn't even his *loft*! And the voice belonged to Vivian, who was lying on the bed, beside where he'd been. She sat up, watching him, eyes filled with concern. "Nick, it's only noon. You should be sleeping."

The vestiges of dreams still clinging to him, cobwebbing his mind; Nick rubbed his eyes with the tips of his fingers, then looked around. He was standing between two double beds, in a hotel room. The windows, behind him, had been covered with heavy blankets that had been pinned together with an overlap, then tacked into place—he remembered helping Vivian to fix them, only moments before sunrise. His socks and shoes sat at the bottom of the bed, his jacket—looking as if it had been pressed—was hanging in the closet.

"Are you all right?" asked Vivian. Rising from the bed, she walked around it, toward him.

There was a table, with the remains of Vivian's egg salad sandwich and a full bottle of cow's blood provided by Janette, with another in the ice bucket and an empty third having been washed out and sitting on the dresser. Everything was arranged, handled, taken care of.

"Nick?"

She touched his shoulder, drew her hand back, and only then did he look at her. Her socks and shoes were gone and she was wearing the clothing she'd had on the night before, the only things she'd taken when she'd fled from Dorian. Reaching up, she touched his forehead with a damp washrag she'd lifted from the

table, as she'd passed. He flinched from the touch, at first, then saw the rag came away dotted with red.

"That must have been *some* dream."

"It was. Natalie—" It was the night before last, when Dorian had gone for Natalie's throat. But this time the blood ran down her neck in a rivulet. He couldn't move, was frozen in place, as Natalie's wide eyes stared at him, filled with shock, then betrayal, then accusation as he stood, watching. It was only when the lashes flickered, the lids closed, that he was able to move, smashing the table in two to get to her. But by then her body was limp, her heart still, her skin already chilled by death.

The touch of Vivian's hand on his arm brought him back to himself. Her blue eyes were wide and earnest. "She's all right. You've got to keep telling yourself that. He can't touch her until *after* the interview."

"But he's exempt from the Code, isn't he?"

Vivian looked away. "Parts of it."

"He can do whatever he wants, to whomever he wants, whenever he wants."

"Whatever, whomever, whenever," she echoed, her voiced filled with sadness. "But you have to believe she's all right. Or you'll never beat him."

Nick sat on the edge of the second bed and looked down at his hands. "It was . . . only a dream."

"Yes." Vivian stood beside him, then placed her hands on his shoulders, beginning to massage his neck. "So, go back to sleep. Unless . . . are you hungry?"

Lightly, he reached up to take her hands in his, and away from his neck, then he released her. His eyes moved to the bottle of blood sitting on the dresser and, surprisingly, he found the hunger was beginning to burn within him. "I *am*," he said, looking up at her. "But—no. I've had too much."

Vivian gave a light laugh and shook her head, as if in disbelief. "Then why not? If you're hungry . . . drink. It's there."

Smiling, he turned his gaze away from the bottle, to the bed. "I don't think my doctor would agree with you."

"The life of your doctor will depend on how strong you are." When he turned his head quickly to look at her, she nodded at him, then walked to the dresser and picked up the bottle. "We've got a bottle here and another on ice, for later. Feeding can only make you stronger, Nick."

He yawned, then rubbed his eyes with his fingertips again. "No, I'm too tired. And I haven't fed this much in a long time. I'll be sick."

"You'll be *healthy*," corrected Vivian, replacing the bottle on the dresser with obvious reluctance. "You'll need to be at your best, if you're going to defeat Dorian and save your Natalie."

Shaking his head, Nick moved back to the bed in which he'd awakened—the furthest from the window, then slipped in between the cotton sheets. "Not *my* Natalie. Just . . . Natalie."

"Oh, yeah? Then what was that business about two double beds at the front desk?"

"I was thinking of your reputation." Nick punched up the weak pillow behind him, then, as an afterthought, grabbed the other pillow beside him.

"What reputation? To vampires, I'm beneath notice, unless they're hungry or I'm with Dorian. And all other mortals see is an aging soap actress." Vivian climbed onto the bed and stretched out beside him, on top of the blankets. "If anyone's worried about his reputation, it should be *you*, after checking into a hotel with *me*."

Nick laughed, but pointed to the other bed. "I thought we agreed—?"

"You agreed. I stayed quiet until you fell asleep."

Yawning, he continued to point to the other bed. "I'm serious."

"What's the problem?" Leaning on her elbow, she gave him a wan smile. "I always slept beside Dorian. He got lonely."

"It's not safe." Sitting up in bed, Nick met her eyes. "I don't want you in danger."

"Danger?" Her eyes opened wide. "What? Don't tell me you snore—?"

This wasn't going well. Nick brought his hands up to his face and shook his head. "Vivian, I'm afraid . . . well . . . I might—"

"Take advantage of me?" The sadness in her voice caused him to drop his hands and look at her. "Nick, I'm used to it. I've had five years of being 'used to it.'"

"But I'm *not* Dorian. I might kill you."

He hoped that would frighten her. Instead, he saw something in her eyes that might have been hope, accompanied by a soft smile. "Better you than Dorian. And you could always bring me across."

Nick frowned, still seeing that hope in her eyes. "I thought you didn't *want* to come across."

Vivian sat up quickly. She looked at the wall, clasping and unclasping her hands. "I don't. Not by him. He's so . . . twisted. But if it's inevitable, being brought across by you—" her eyes fixed on his, as she turned and leaned close to him "—might not be so bad. Nick, I'm *not* afraid of you."

She was right. He saw no fear in her eyes, or in her. Nick stroked her hair lightly, then held her in his arms for a moment, enjoying the closeness, her heart beating against him, without dread or fear. But . . . how could he explain to her that *he* was afraid, of himself?

For a moment, he simply sat there. Then Nick pulled back from her, kissed her on the forehead, and pointed to the other bed. "Go! Or I'll move."

"Closer to the window?" Vivian looked at him as if her were crazy, then smiled. Slowly, she slipped out of his arms and off the bed, puffing indignantly, "All right, all right! Gee, so much for the *femme fatale* tips from Susan Lucci."

Settling back against the pillows, he watched her walk to the other bed. "Who?"

Vivian stopped and stared at him. "You really *don't* watch the soaps, do you?"

"No. Schanke does."

She snapped her fingers, the sound cutting through the torpor that daylight could induce in him. "Almost forgot—I had the phone disconnected and told them to take messages. They delivered one an hour ago." Reaching into her jeans pocket, Vivian withdrew a folded slip of paper, which she handed to Nick.

Struggling to a sitting position, he unfolded the paper. He'd placed the phone call to Diane Osgood, as he'd promised Stonetree, apologizing for having her dragged down there, adding the usual public relations stuff on the end to make it sound legitimate. The only other call he'd made before he'd fallen asleep was to Schanke, filling him in on what he suspected of Diane Osgood and warning him about possible word from a metal series on Kenko's corpse.

The message was succinct, but cryptic—obviously some well-seasoned desk clerk's interpretation of the Schanke rambling narrative. The Coroner's Office confirmed the traces on Kenko's hands. And since none of Kenko's other artifacts could account for the traces, the warrant to search Osgood's home and office for the triptych had gone through.

Ignoring the Schankesque, 'told you she was the one,' scribbled along the bottom, Nick said, "Yes!"

"Good news?" asked Vivian, sitting on the bed, beside him.

"I've got a suspect. *And* a case. Or, at least, the beginning of one."

Taking the note from his hand, Vivian looked at it. "Well, Detective Schanke *did* say you were a good cop." She looked at him, over the top of the paper. "You'd be a better Enforcer, though."

Something inside of him went cold at the thought. Swallowing, he stared at her. "Don't even joke about it."

"I mean it." Looking down at the paper again, she frowned. "Bunch of heartless bastards, they do everything by trial and error. They move too fast, just want to get it over with. Innocent people get hurt. Like . . . me." The eyes that met his were hard. "You'd keep to the Code. You'd make them what they used to be—fair."

Nick shivered and looked away. "No."

"Why not? You're one of the nicest, kindest, most honest vampires I've ever seen."

Glancing back at her, he smiled. "Thanks, but . . . I don't want to *be* one of the nicest, kindest, etc. vampires."

Vivian stared at him, eyes opening wide in amazement. "You're not telling me you want—you *want* to go back across? Become *mortal* again?"

There was an element of derision in her tone—he'd heard it often enough from Janette and LaCroix to recognize it instantly. He looked away, suddenly embarrassed. "Let's just drop it."

"But that's never worked," continued Vivian. "Dorian's talked about it—they end up dead or walk into the sun. Nick, a hell of a lot of vampires before you have tried and failed."

He stared at her. "Maybe they didn't try hard enough."

"How hard is hard enough?" When he didn't answer, looking away again, she took his hand. "Nick, you're a pretty level-headed vampire. It's just not . . . rational."

"What's *wrong* with wanting to walk in the sun again?" he asked, softly. "To live? To have children? To grow old . . . ?"

"To *die*." When he looked back at her, Vivian had turned sideways, holding her arms tightly against her chest. "Nick, you're scaring me. This is wrong. This is *all* wrong. I never—I *never* should have left Dorian."

Again, he leaned forward and put his arms around her. "No. It's *right* that you left him. I promised to protect you, Vivian, and I *will*."

But she pushed him away, staring at him with accusation swimming in those blue eyes. "How? How can you protect me when you can't protect yourself?" But her gaze softened. "You can beat him, Nick. You *can* destroy him. But . . . as a *vampire*." When he looked away, she touched his chin, tuning his face back toward her. "You have to be a vampire to fight him. And you'd be saving your own kind, as well as the mortal world. You know what Dorian's done in the past, what he'll do again."

Nick closed his eyes. Janette. Carlotta. And even . . . LaCroix? So much to avenge. So much for one man, one *vampire* to avenge . . . .

"Yes," he admitted, opening his eyes, meeting her gaze. "You're right."

Vivian smiled, brushing his cheek with the palm of her hand. "So go to sleep. I'll keep watch."

He took her hand in his and kissed the knuckles, as her fingers tightened around his own. "I won't fail you. You'll be free of Dorian. I promise."

"I know."

Then, her hand in his, Nick matched her smile and pointed toward the other bed. "Go."

Vivian gave him a mock frown then laughed, as he released her fingers. "All right, all right. On my way." Slipping off the blanket, she walked over to the other bed and sat down. When she saw that he was still watching, she stuck her tongue out at him, then made a point of pulling the edge of the covers out from beneath the mattress and scuttling under them. "You happy?"

"Relieved." Intertwining his fingers, Nick placed his hands behind his head and rested back against the two, paper-thin pillows. For the first time, he had hope—no, *confidence*—in his heart. With all he'd heard, was it possible that he could defeat Dorian? There wouldn't be any Enforcers, just one-on-one. LaCroix had said to wait. He'd been right. Dorian's time had come.

Smiling, Nick closed his eyes and let drowsiness steal over him. Too much depended on him—Vivian's life, Natalie's life . . . . This time, he wouldn't be too late. This time, he'd have his chance at Dorian, and he'd win.

And as slumber stole over him, he dimly realized that a warm, mortal body, was once again lying beside him.

CHAPTER TWELVE

NATALIE'S eyes shot open. Against the blackness of the night, a darker, blacker shadow was bending over her. Letting out a shriek, she kicked at the blankets and scuttled backwards, firmly whacking her head on something wooden behind her.

"Watch! It's only me, Dr. Lambert."

It took her a moment to place the voice—Dorian. The black shadow moved away and a few seconds later, sudden light blinded her. Blinking, she waited, until her eyes adjusted.

The blankets she'd kicked away were bunched around her. She was sitting on the mattress and had banged her head against the base of the wooden counter. Glancing down, she realized that she'd fallen asleep in the very expensive dress . . . which was starting to look like a very expensive rag.

Dorian was standing by the light switch, near the door that led to the garage. "I'm sorry if I gave you a fright. I was trying to tuck you in. I'm . . . not very good at it, I'm afraid." He smiled sheepishly, then turned to the door. With a twist, he snapped off the padlock. "Taking care of people, I mean."

His woebegone expression made her want to laugh and cry at the same time. Shaking her head, Natalie drew her knees against her chest, then decided against that maneuver when the skirt of the dress rode up far too high for comfort. "I'm fine. But . . . warn me next time, okay?" Looking up, she realized that she couldn't see daylight through the blocked windows. Then she checked her watch.

"The sun's setting," said Dorian, obvious relief in his tone, as he tossed the broken lock to the floor. "Can't you feel it?"

More often than not, Nick could tell her to the minute what time the sun was going to set. It was one of the things she meant to test when she'd gotten a chance, thinking it might be interesting to pinpoint the source of that particular vampire survival skill, whether it be learned behavior or innate sensitivity. Even the thought of being able to know something like that unconsciously, and what that entailed, made her shiver. "No. And I'm just as glad I can't."

Dorian frowned. "That was thoughtless of me. I'm sorry." Walking over to the mattress, he leaned down, offering her a hand up. "I tried to make breakfast—dinner?— for you. I'm afraid I wasn't very successful."

Taking his hand, she rose to her feet, then hopped off the mattress. Natalie spotted the very chic but painful shoes still lying where she'd kicked them off the night before—her feet would probably be too sore and swollen to fit into them. She'd have to have a talk with Dorian about the practicality of women's apparel versus smart shopping.

She expected him to release her hand the moment she'd left the mattress and hit the concrete floor, but Dorian led her around the counter, escorting her to the table. He'd put together a place setting with the plastic utensils and paper plates. There was a very rough hewn sandwich waiting for her, as well as a perking pot of coffee—she was surprised she hadn't smelled the heavenly aroma immediately upon waking.

Only then did he let go of her hand, but that was to stand behind her chair, pulling it from the table for her. "Allow me."

"Thank you." Natalie sat down and he pushed her toward the table. "I didn't know you were so domestic."

"It's my first attempt." Walking around the table, he seated himself at the other side, across from her, then unfolded a map.

Natalie couldn't help but smile—if he'd substituted a newspaper for the map, the scene would have resembled most of the breakfast settings in the western hemisphere, apart from the sandwich. Reaching for the pot, she poured the coffee into a Styrofoam cup. It was suspiciously dark, blacker than any coffee she'd ever seen before. The presence of several packets of sugar gave her the nerve to try it.

After the first sip, it took most of her concentration to put the cup on the table and not spit the hideous stuff over the back of Dorian's map. She was surprised that her eyes were still in her head, then found Dorian gazing at her over the map, in a concerned manner.

"Is it all right? I've never made the stuff before. And the directions on the can indicated such a small amount—?"

"It's . . . fine. For a first attempt." When he went back to the newspaper, she quickly put the cup aside, wondering how much of the can he'd actually used. Her fears about the sandwich were justified when she lifted the top pieces of bread—Dorian had selected one piece of every luncheon meat he'd purchased. Which meant the olive loaf was nestled in between pressed turkey and salami. She wasn't certain she wanted to know why the Swiss cheese was adamantly curling *away* from what appeared to be headcheese and some stuff with a blue-green border that didn't appear to have terrestrial origins.

Again, Dorian peered over the map.

"Perfect," she told him. "But it's a little, uh, too much for me first thing in the morning."

The comment seemed to appease him. He went back to his map and Natalie sighed to herself. She'd rescue the bread and some of the more edible bits of the sandwich later, if she had a chance. Right now she hoped that her stomach would stay quiet—the last thing she wanted Dorian to know was that breakfast was the one meal at which she ate like a horse.

Natalie suddenly realized he had neither mug nor bottle in front of him. She looked around for the cooler, which she remembered showering with half a bag of popcorn in the darkness. "Dorian—have you—?"

"I've already fed, thank you." Folding the map, he placed it flat against the table, staring down at it. "I've seen how mortals react sometimes—like early last evening, at Nick's place? I wanted to save you any awkwardness."

She flinched, inwardly. Dorian didn't know that her reaction hadn't been to seeing Nick drink blood, but to how much blood he drank—contrary to what he'd promised her the night before. "I appreciate it." But then she looked at his eyes—there was a red-gold tint to the blackness. She'd seen that before, when Nick had a little too much for his own good. She had a feeling that if vampires could get loaded from straight blood—absenting that alcohol mix that Janette seemed to thrive on—Dorian was well on his way to being pie-eyed. "Dorian, how much have you had?"

"My usual before an interview," he said absently, his voice and manner showing no mortal signs of intoxication. "Three bottles."

"Three?"

There was no response. As Natalie studied him, she realized that this wasn't the same, sleepy, fearful vampire she'd watched over during the day. He was . . . different, confident, more self-possessed. And even though he'd slept in the off-the-rack suit, it looked like it had been newly pressed.

His eyes met hers and he smiled, as if reading her thoughts. "Yes, Dr. Lambert. I'm the Archivist. And it's time for me to go to work." Lifting the map in his hands, he seemed ready to fold it, then dropped it to the table in disgust. "I didn't mean to wake you before I left."

Gratefully, Natalie pushed the plate with the sandwich aside, staring at him across the table. "You were going to face Nick without me."

"I *am* going to face Nick without you."

"No." Natalie stood and stared down at him, kicking back her chair. "I can stop this. I know I can. If I can get Nick to listen about the Enforcers, about you—"

Dorian rose slowly, his eyes locking with her own. Walking around the table, he placed his hands over her forearms. "Nick won't listen to you. He'll think I have you under my spell or some such nonsense. He'll think I . . . lied to you." Dorian frowned. "And it will *still* happen. If you're there, you'll be in danger, which might distract me. I can't afford any distractions this time."

He stared into her eyes, his grip on her arms tightening, but not hurting her. "Dr. Lambert, you *must*

stay here. Where it's safe. You must stay here."

For a moment, she stared into his eyes, then, realizing what he was doing, she couldn't help but smile. "Nick told you hypnotizing me wouldn't work."

Releasing her, Dorian took a step backward and shrugged. "He's lied about so many other things, it seemed a good possibility." Then, he matched her smile. "I should have known. True hearts seldom fall under our power."

"You'd be surprised."

Dorian's smile fell away. "I'm beginning to understand something of Nick, through you. Now I know why he tried so hard to protect you. I would have done the same."

Natalie raised an eyebrow. "You would have lied?"

"For you?" He seemed to consider the possibility, frowning, as he turned away. "Perhaps . . . ."

Natalie caught his arm. "Dorian, this shouldn't happen. It shouldn't come down to you or Nick. This isn't what you intended." But when he refused to look at her, a chill stole through her and she released him, as if burned. "Or . . . is it? You *knew* this would happen?"

"I should be going."

Again, Natalie caught his arm, stopping him as he went to pass her. "Let me guess, you were losing ground against the Enforcers? You knew they were working on a way to get you."

She didn't bother hiding the bitterness in her tone, or blunting the sharp edge of accusation. Dorian didn't turn to face her, but he didn't break her grip on him, which he could have done easily enough. What was mortal strength, mortal outrage, when compared to the force and cold intent of a vampire?

"I decided I'd take it out of their hands, do one more thing before I left the world . . . one *good* thing." He looked down, then back at her, over his shoulder. "I told you that Nick and I have something of a history. Each time I've goaded Nick into attacking me, LaCroix's rescued him. I'd hoped this time—this *last* time—would be no different. I wanted LaCroix to try to save his mastiff again." He closed his eyes, looking back to the floor. "LaCroix could kill me now. Easily. But then, the Enforcers would destroy him for breaking the Code, for interfering with an interview."

Natalie saw the edges of a smile on his lips. "They'd never offer him the alternative—to become the new Archivist. I'd be gone from the world, but so would LaCroix. It would be my best legacy, my last legacy."

Her heart lightened as she listened to him—Dorian didn't know LaCroix was dead. He didn't know that Nick had killed LaCroix, so Nick wasn't in danger for breaking that part of the Code. But it would still come out in the interview . . . .

Dorian turned to her and she stared at him, wondering what she could say to stop him, to dissuade him from the course he'd chosen. She could almost understand why he'd done what he'd done—he was trying to find some way of dying with honor, of making what he felt was inevitable, worth *something*. But he'd failed. LaCroix was already dead. And now . . . Dorian would have to settle for taking Nick with him. And the world would lose both.

She'd lose both.

Natalie opened her mouth, but Dorian put a finger to her lips. "I'll tell Nick where you are, so he can properly rescue you when it's done. The car keys for the rental are there. I'd appreciate it if you returned it for me. It's proper that someone have something kind to say about me after my passing, even if it's nothing more than the car rental people appreciating my promptness." He looked away for a moment. "And . . . take care of Vivian for me, if she's still alive when this is over. She'll be a boon to the next Archivist—always did all of my local research for me—and maybe he'll bring her across, as she wants. She'll take care of my affairs and my debts."

"No," whispered Natalie, shivering. It was like listening to someone read a suicide note aloud. "Dorian, this can't—"

"Good-bye, Mouse-Mouse. Thank you for taking such good care of me." He smiled, then leaned forward and kissed her gently on the lips.

That surprised her. And the fear in her heart turned to anger, as she began to hate the waste of it, the injustice of it all. "Dorian—"

He touched his hand to her cheek. "Remember me." And then he whirled and stalked to the door that led to the garage.

Mortal reflexes couldn't match immortal speed. Natalie hurried after him, shouting, "Dorian! This can't happen! This can't be *allowed* to happen!"

She saw the door open. She saw him walk through and close the door behind him. Natalie reached the door, her hand moving toward the catch just as the bolt clicked into place, on the other side. "Dorian! No!" She pounded against the door with her hand, hearing the metal echo in the garage beyond.

But even over that noise, she heard the garage door slide upward. And knew, seconds later, that he had gone.

"Damn!" Again, she slammed her hand against the door, then turned and leaned her back against it. He was flying. That was why he'd been checking the map so diligently. He'd left her the rental car and he was *flying*.

Natalie slid down into a seated position, her back against the door, and put her fist under her chin. There was no phone. The door was locked from the other side—and it was a bolt, which meant she had next to no chance of breaking through it.

Not to mention the rancid taste of Dorian's version of morning coffee, which still lingered in her mouth. Rising to her feet, Natalie made a mental note to include toothpaste and a toothbrush in her emergency kit. But, in the meantime . . . .

She walked to the counter, picked up a can of warm cola, and popped the tab. It was too sweet, but it got the taste out of her mouth. And she stared sadly at the

breakfast Dorian had so carefully prepared for her. It was a kind gesture. Too bad she had to lie to him about it.

Natalie froze, the can to her lips. Slowly, she placed it back on the counter, still staring at that hideous sandwich. She'd *lied* to Dorian. And he'd never noticed. He could tell when *vampires* lied . . . but no one had ever said anything about mortals. Nick had said he could detect a lie if he listened to a mortal heartbeat, if he concentrated and/or hypnotized someone. But if Dorian couldn't tell that *she* was lying . . . .

The thought wouldn't follow through. Her brain was still muddy with sleep—she thought her hours were weird *before* she met Nick!—and the adrenaline rush from Dorian's departure was ebbing from her. What she needed was a clear head. She needed to *think*.

Natalie headed for the bathroom, turning on the light as she entered. Earlier today, she'd noticed that it wasn't spotless, but it *was* relatively clean. Running the water from the tap—and waiting for it to turn from brown, to yellow, to clear—Natalie again looked over the bleak facilities. It wouldn't have been *left* in such reasonable shape. Had Dorian cleaned it? She doubted he would've known how, being relatively helpless at domestic chores. That would've been one of the things Vivian handled.

Splashing the water on her face, Natalie sighed. Dorian relied too much on his mortal help. Vivian seemed to take care of all of his arrangements, from taking paperwork to Nick, to actually delivering the interview time and place, to his research . . . .

The water was still running, but Natalie didn't pay any attention to it, caught up as she was in her train of thought. Vivian did the research—which was why Dorian didn't know LaCroix had been destroyed. Vivian hadn't told him. Vivian had *lied*. And she'd gotten away with it because she was *mortal*.

Staring into the mirror, Natalie nodded, murmuring, "Vivian." That's what hadn't made sense. The Enforcers would *never* have gotten Nick to go along with their plans, no matter how much he hated Dorian. Which meant they'd have to trick him into acting *for* them. And Vivian was the link—the Enforcers were using her to dupe both Dorian and Nick into doing exactly what they wanted.

Again, Natalie reached down to splash water on her face. It was cool and helped ease the fire burning in her brain. The Enforcers needed Vivian because she was a mortal . . . but why did she need *them*? Dorian said he'd saved Vivian from the Enforcers, that she wanted him to turn her, but he wouldn't. He'd admitted that he'd never had the courage to bring anyone across.

So maybe the Enforcers had promised to bring her across . . . if she delivered Dorian to them.

Closing her eyes, Natalie leaned on the edge of the sink. In her line of work, she knew most of what there was to know about building a case and evidentiary procedure. The line of logic she'd come up with wouldn't be enough to get her a warrant, never mind stand up in court.

But it made *sense*.

And Vivian had been spending time with Nick—Dorian had sent her there twice. Who knew what kind of lies she'd been feeding him? She'd primed Nick to kill Dorian. And, after he did, the Enforcers would find him . . . .

Natalie opened her eyes and glared at her reflection. She *had* to get out of here. She *had* to stop them.

Automatically, she flipped off the light as she exited the bathroom, then walked to the table. The car keys were right where Dorian had said, beneath the map. As she went to drop the map on the table, she caught sight of an address scrawled down one margin—Vivian's handwriting? Knowing Dorian, he probably needed to be handed most of the detail work on a platter—so she knew where he'd be meeting Nick, at least. It was in Toronto. And though she didn't know the street well, she knew the warehouse and factory location enough to find it in the dark.

Which she'd have to do. Picking up the keys and map, Natalie dropped them into her purse as she passed it, then kept going to retrieve her shoes. Grimacing, she leaned on the counter and, while wedging one foot into the green pump, caught sight of the other padlocked door.

Not bothering to put on the other shoe, Natalie limped across the concrete floor to the outer door. The weather stripping on the inside and out had kept out the daylight, but there was enough give between the padlock and the bolt through which it was looped that she might be able to pry it open. She needed a metal bar, a crowbar, or something of that nature.

She wedged her left foot into the other shoe, as she eyed the room, scanning for something, anything, that would get her out of her prison. Once her shoes were properly on—ouch—she walked to the counter, but the bags had nothing but junk food and coldcuts left. There were still several wooden boxes by Dorian's cooler.

Natalie knelt down beside the boxes, but paused. These were Dorian's things. If he was killed, he wouldn't care that she'd poked around in his stuff. And if he *wasn't* killed because she'd managed to get there in time, she wouldn't take any shit from him about messing around in other people's stuff. Served him right, especially after he'd picked out these shoes from hell.

The lid of the long wooden box had metal hinges. Natalie opened the top and was inundated with the scent of freshly carved wood. The stakes in the box were evil looking things—about two feet long with very sharp points.

She picked one up, suddenly remembering the trap in the car . . . but that stake had been different, if no less deadly. Did the Enforcers have a stake shop somewhere, where they churned out these things in bulk?

Testing the point with her finger, she winced, but it didn't break the skin. They were sharp little beggars. And, holding one in her hands, she decided she preferred a freshly cut stake. Knowing what they were used for,

she didn't think she could have touched a 'dirty' one. Then again, she was desperate enough to use one with the vampire still attached, if it meant getting out of there.

Natalie returned to the locked door and slipped the stake in between the padlock and the loop. Leaning back against the wall and the door, she pulled the dull end of the stake toward her with both hands. It wasn't unlike rowing with a locked oar.

The metal groaned, then one of the bolts holding the lock popped lose, flying into the counter and bouncing off who knew where. Natalie paused for a moment, massaging her shoulder—which had banged into the door—then reset the stake and tried again. Her second attempt did nothing, other than slam her into the door. But the third try, accompanied by a groan of sheer frustration, sent the other bolt flying to join the first.

Breathing heavily, Natalie looked down at the stake in her hands with appreciative eyes. They were, all in all, handy things. Maybe she'd keep one of those in her emergency medical kit, too. Or take it with her, as a good luck charm, like Grace's rabbit's foot. Although she'd need a long chain for it . . . kind of a Swiss army stake.

Natalie opened the door and looked out into the spring evening. She had no idea where the hell she was. But she had the map. She'd find street signs. And she had the car, because she was damn sure Dorian had trusted Vivian to close garage doors for him, among her other chores.

Walking back to the counter, Natalie grabbed her purse, her medical bag, and, as an afterthought, the warm can of Coke, then headed out into the darkness. Speed limits were *not* going to be a problem, because she knew she'd break even the laws of physics to get there in time to save Nick's life, Dorian's life, and—by extension—her own.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

NICK LEANED against the driver's side door of the Caddy and looked upward, finding a narrow ribbon of night sky. This was a man-made canyon, the buildings on either side forming a maze of back alleys. And still, his ears held the echo of footsteps, from the last time he'd walked this way, when he'd followed LaCroix. Closing his eyes, he could hear other sounds, stored in memory, replayed time and again—'How long is the longest friendship?'

How long should *anyone* have to wait for vengeance?

The sound of the trunk shutting brought him back to the real world and real time. Opening his eyes, he turned. Vivian had slung a large carryall over one shoulder and was holding the strap with both hands. Nick moved to take it from her, but she danced out of his reach.

"No you don't! *I'm* the spear carrier. You've got more important things to worry about. Here."

Lowering the bag to the ground, she reached inside and withdrew a foot-long stake, which she offered to him. Nick stared at the stake a moment, then at her, before taking it. The point was sharper than a blade and deadly to his kind, when used correctly. The solidity of it, the reality of it, brought home the danger of what he would be attempting. "Vivian, you should stay here."

"But if you need help—?"

"There'd be nothing you could do," he said, putting what he hoped was enough of an edge in his voice to convince her.

But her blue eyes were hard and unyielding. "You'd be surprised."

"You know the Code." Nick looked down the alley, to the fire escape that led to the meat plant Dorian had indicated as the place for the interview. "No one else is allowed."

"This isn't an interview. It's a duel. It's . . . personal, isn't it?"

He gave her a grim smile. "*Very* personal." But then the smile faded when he saw the challenge in her eyes. "Promise me you'll stay here. It'll make it that much easier for me to go in

there, if I know you're out of harm's way."

"I won't promise." Vivian frowned, looking down at the ground, then tilted her head and gazed up at him through her lashes. "But . . . I'll *try*." She reached up and kissed him on the cheek. "For trying to protect me," she explained, in response to his questioning look.

"I *will* protect you. You'll be free of him."

"And you'll have Natalie back?"

Nick looked away, up to the fire escape, unable to answer that question. Natalie was all right, she *had* to be all right. But as to whether he'd 'have her back,' after everything he'd said, they'd said . . . .

What could that matter, now? Dorian was waiting, he could feel his presence. "It's time."

In that moment he felt the red-gold burn in his eyes. He'd fed heavily, savoring the power for the first time in . . . how long *had* it been? Hefting the stake in his hand, feeling its weight, aware of the damage it could cause, he had more than just hope that he would win—Nick *knew* he was going to defeat Dorian. There could be no other outcome.

He could have walked the rest of the way and up the fire escape, but he had no wish to hear those remembered footfalls echo again. Instead, he flew straight for the landing, rising up into the air. Nick grabbed a bar with his free hand and swung himself onto the iron structure, smiling to hear it ring and shiver with his sudden weight. LaCroix had been right. Now was the time for his revenge.

Some small voice in him gave him pause. He looked down from his perch, back to where Vivian should be waiting, by the car. He didn't see her . . . but then, she might be hiding, as he'd asked. If only he knew for certain that Natalie was safe. If only she were here.

But that small voice warned him that if Natalie were here, she wouldn't let him do this thing. She wouldn't approve. And if her approval meant anything to him anymore, as it once had meant everything . . . .

Nick ignored the voice and walked toward the door. He touched it lightly and it swung inward, into darkness—the lock had been snapped off. Pausing, he smiled at the thought of trying to arrest Dorian for breaking and entering. Now that would be interesting. But Dorian's rap sheet was longer, older, and more deadly than any simple count of b-and-e.

When he walked inside, the remembered smell matched the scent of the place perfectly—stale blood and fresh blood blended together, so heady a mixture in the air that he turned his head to one side for an instant, stunned by the fierce call of the blood. Added to that was the fetid stench of rot and decay from the animal carcasses that were hanging over the various vats and tubs. The two odors warred for his attention, the first enticing and the second nauseating, life and death intermixed. Even though he'd taken in so much blood in so short a span, the hunger still sparked to life at the first whiff of the blood and he felt his eyes begin to gleam again, the interior of the abattoir suddenly filtered through a golden haze.

Closing the door behind him, he walked to the railing and looked up. Moonlight, starlight, and artificial lights from outside drifted in through the windows close to the ceiling. Below was darkness, but he could see there, too. Nick placed his free hand on the railing, then vaulted over it, flying to the floor, below.

He turned, hearing some slight sound, his hand tightening around the stake. He felt uneasy, seeing the place through double vision—memory and real time intermingling, co-existing, flooding his senses.

'You never knew *what* you wanted.'

Closing his eyes, he fought back the memory, the echo of LaCroix in his head. The voice was wrong. This one thing he knew, of this one thing he was *certain*—he wanted to avenge the indignities done to Janette, avenge the deaths of Carlotta and those she loved and had tried to protect. This was just. This was *right*.

And this was why Dorian had chosen the place—he knew there'd be memories here to torment him, knew that LaCroix's presence in this place would be strong. Nick found himself looking skyward again, for a moment believing that LaCroix *would* be there, was watching him. But it was only the phantoms of his mind, of his guilt, playing tricks on him. He shut them out as cruelly and coldly as he had extinguished the small voice that had warned of Natalie's disapproval of the course of action he'd chosen to take. Dorian's ploy would fail. He'd have a clear mind, focus only on the vengeance that was due him.

"I call to interview one known as Nicholas. In the past, Nicholas of Brabant. In the present, Nicholas Knight." Dorian's voice echoed throughout the abattoir. It took a moment for Nick to place him, standing at the far side of the room in the shadows, eyes glowing red, like fire.

But there was more to the fire in those eyes than just heavy feeding. Nick knew the signs—Dorian had fed on *human* blood. And that realization stoked his fear for Natalie, drowning out the small wisps of hunger that worried at him.

Nick took a step forward, cutting a foot from the twenty that separated them. "Where's Natalie?"

"Safe." Dorian never moved. "She'll be returned to you, when we've finished. Although what makes you think yourself worthy of that true heart still eludes me."

Safe was a relative term—Dorian's assurance did nothing to alleviate his concern. "If you've harmed her—"

Dorian smiled. "I call for the second time, for the interview of Nicholas. In the past, Nicholas of Brabant. In the present, Nicholas Knight." He paused, still smiling. "You get only one more chance, you know. Yield, Nicholas. Stand for the interview. All we need do is talk. I'll ask questions and you answer them." The red eyes darkened. "But don't lie to me."

He took another step forward, matching Dorian's smile. "Lie to the Master of Lies? How could I? That's how you snared Natalie, isn't it? You've told her nothing

but lies. About you. About me? What lies have you told her about me, Dorian? How did you turn her against me?"

"I've told her nothing but the truth," answered Dorian, the smile slipping from his lips. "Perhaps the truths about yourself that you never had the courage to tell her? You turned her against yourself, Nicholas, with your false words, your false heart."

He'd expected Dorian to gloat, to lie, to taunt . . . but the Archivist's words made him pause. Nick looked away for an instant, wondering what Dorian *had* told Natalie about him. He'd freely admitted to her that there'd been a time when darkness had filled him. But he'd never *really* told her more than that. It was to protect her, after all. Because if she knew the evil he'd done in the past, the things of which he'd been capable—would she still smile so brightly when he walked into the lab? Would she feel safe enough to sit beside him on his couch and watch videos? Would she think him worth the effort of trying to bring him back across? His silence had only been to protect *her*.

Behind closed eyes, Nick forced himself to admit the truth—his silence was to protect *himself*, from losing her. There were no lies, but many words unspoken. If he'd had the courage to speak them, maybe she would have listened, maybe she would have understood the danger Dorian presented, maybe she would *still* have smiled at him.

But he hadn't had the courage. And if she'd heard those words anyway, colored by the tongue of his enemy . . . .

Opening his eyes, he glared at Dorian across the space, hating him more than even the sum of the times he'd been held back from just vengeance by LaCroix. And Dorian met his stare evenly, but the red in his eyes had turned to black, and there was some sadness in him.

"Tell me, this last honest thing, before we begin in earnest. Tell me, Nicholas, have you murdered my Vivian? Or . . . is she safe?"

"As safe as Natalie," he hissed, expecting to see his own anger and fear for Natalie's safety reflect in Dorian's eyes.

But Dorian surprised him again, merely nodding once. It was a confirmation that Natalie *was* safe . . . if beyond his reach, perhaps forever. Nick felt compelled to add, in a civil tone, "*Safer*. She's left you, Dorian. She's not *your* Vivian. She's her own person."

"No." Dorian's eyes were filled with disbelief. He looked down at the floor, then across the room, as if searching for some proof of the statement. "No, that's not possible. I *saved* her from the Enforcers."

"Saved her for *yourself*, you mean. You *used* her. You took everything she had and then treated her like a pet, a servant. Mortals can't live like that, Dorian."

He'd struck a nerve—Dorian seemed confused, disoriented. He met Nick's eyes again. "But—"

"You could have made her forget, couldn't you? You could have released her, sent her back to her life."

"She *asked* for it." Dorian shook his head, as if finding fault with either Nick's words or his memory of the events. "It's what she *wanted*."

"Or is it what *you* wanted?" Nick walked as he spoke, halving the distance between them.

The indecision in Dorian lasted only a moment longer, then he glared at Nick, the red returning to his eyes. "Lies," he accused. "Lies from a liar. Falsehoods from a false heart. For the third and final time, I call for the interview of Nicholas. In the past, Nicholas of Brabant. In the present, Nicholas Knight." Drawing himself to his full height, Dorian smiled. "How say you? Will you stand?"

Two steps; then four more . . . until there was no more than two feet between them. Nick smiled in answer. "I refuse."

"It's your right. Just as it's my duty to test you."

A deep chuckle rose from Nick's throat, as he stood across from the Archivist. "How, Dorian? There are no Enforcers here to hold me while you torture me, as you did LaCroix. You can't brutalize me, as you did Janette. And unlike Carlotta, I won't walk into the dawn for you." Nick stepped closer, nose to nose with his enemy. "What can you do, Dorian? How can you test me?"

Dorian's smile slipped away and his eyes held nothing but sadness again. "I thought the Enforcers pulled your strings, puppet. I was right. You're one of them."

The words stung too close to home, too similar to Vivian's suggestion that he could easily become an Enforcer. "Never!" Remembering the stake in his hand, Nick lifted it and lunged. But Dorian took to the air, rising straight up, the faint light from the windows hiding all of his features, except the red of his eyes, which glared down at Nick.

"So . . . it begins." His hand made a motion to his jacket and suddenly, he, too, was armed with a stake. He swooped down at Nick.

Ducking, Nick waited until Dorian was almost past him, then launched himself from the floor, grabbing Dorian's arm and pulling him off balance. For a few seconds they grappled in mid-air, then Nick landed a blow that sent them both tumbling toward the floor. Dorian hit first, not knowing enough to take the fall on his shoulder, landing flat on his back.

Nick rolled with the fall, but hit a drum of animal blood, punching a hole in it as he kicked it away. The thick red liquid flooded out, covering him, and the floor. He tried to rise to his feet, then suddenly felt some stirring of memory that caused him to look up, to the skylight again.

There was nothing there.

It was some second sense that saved him, as Dorian hefted the empty drum toward him. Scrambling to his feet, Nick avoided all but a glancing blow from the metal, catching that with his forearm. The momentum spun him around, as he waited for Dorian's next attack.

But there was a pause, as Dorian, too, glanced

skyward, an odd expression on his face. He shifted the stake, a hand at either end, as he looked back at Nick. It was as if he was confirming that he'd really heard or sensed something.

Nick had fought in enough places over time to know when to press his advantage. He leaped forward, flying upward, then letting his weight carry him to the floor, both hands wrapped around the top of the stake. He aimed downward, trying to catch Dorian in the chest.

The stake in Dorian's hand rose, blocking the thrust. Nick leaned heavily against the stake that blocked him, but Dorian pushed upward. Neither was willing to relinquish his grip on the wooden weapon, eyes locked, inches apart. But then Nick's right foot slipped on a patch of spilled blood. He moved with the fall, releasing one hand from the stake and rolling on his shoulder, away from Dorian. The Archivist slashed down at his back with the stake.

The move left his jacket covered in blood. Nick rose to a crouch warily, stake in hand. Dorian had put too much force behind his blow and had fallen into another barrel, which clattered to the floor and released another red flood.

But Dorian was on his feet again. Fangs bared, he ran at Nick, stake raised high in his right hand. At the last second, Nick kicked out with his foot, catching Dorian in the leg. As they both fell, Nick rolled out of the way, and regained his footing, stake still in his hand.

The entire floor was now sticky and slick with blood. Dorian slid headlong into the thick of the mess, losing hold of the stake. It clattered away, just beyond his reach. Snarling, Nick leaped the span of distance between then, landing with his knee in the small of Dorian's back. Twisting one of Dorian's arms sharply behind him, Nick hefted the stake in his hand. Leaning his head back, he let the dark laughter of victory roar through him, as he sighted his blow, then raised the stake high, preparing to take his vengeance, once and for all.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

HER PURSE and medical bag rested on the seat of the car. For a moment, Natalie thought about taking them, then shook her head. She locked the car door and dropped the car keys in her pocket, then picked up the stake.

She was in the right place. She knew that much because Nick's car was in front of Dorian's rental. Walking past it, she trailed the fingers of her free hand along the side and doors of the car. It was empty, but not locked. There was no sign of Nick, of course.

Natalie paused when she reached the hood of the car, then looked up and down the alley. Which way? It was quiet at night. The remaining drops of a light daytime rain trickled down gutters and pattered onto the tar or brick or cement. From a street or two away, she could hear the sound of cars passing. But other than that, there was no indication that this was a place of madness and mayhem and death.

Her best bet was straight ahead. Natalie began to walk, her hurried footsteps drowning out the hushed sound of water escaping through the gutters. Occasionally, she stopped, wincing, as those horrid shoes that Dorian had chosen for her rubbed her sore feet the wrong way. But sparkles of glass fragments on the blacktop convinced her that going barefoot wasn't an intelligent option.

Like trying to stop a fight between two vampires was?

That's when she spotted the lowered ladder of a fire escape. Natalie headed for it, listening carefully. There were sounds from above . . . muffled, but there. Gritting her teeth, she climbed up the flaking iron ladder, reaching the first landing and set of stairs. The heavy metal-backed door was locked.

Sighing, Natalie moved up the next flight of stairs, then one more. On the third landing, the door was closed, but she saw a padlock lying on the metal mesh floor. Picking it up, Natalie smiled—Dorian left these things around like bread crumbs. She could probably follow him around the world, using bent padlocks as a trail.

But then she sobered and pressed lightly on the metal

door. When it didn't creak, she pushed harder, and it opened.

Natalie sniffed as she entered the room, peering into the darkness. The windows above let in some of the artificial light from outside. She moved to a handrail and looked down, taking note of the animal carcasses hanging over drums. No stranger to blood, she recognized the scent immediately—heavy and old.

But it was the fight below that caught her attention. Blood seemed to be all over the floor and her heart leapt into her throat as she wondered whether it belonged to an overturned drum or one of the two vampires. Dorian slid headfirst across the floor and she heard something clatter against the concrete. Almost faster than she could blink, Nick had risen and was kneeling in the small of Dorian's back. He held a stake in his hand and raised it high, ready to plunge it through Dorian's chest.

It seemed so much like slow motion. She wasn't certain what she yelled, only that she made some sound and threw the padlock at Nick, then headed down the steps to the lower level at a run, her eyes never moving from the two of them.

Nick's head snapped up, his eyes meeting hers. Almost effortlessly, he snagged the padlock from the air. Forgetting Dorian, he struggled to his feet, his eyes going wide at the sight of her, his mouth opening, lips forming her name . . . .

And then something changed in his manner. Nick stared at her, his lips tightening in a grim expression. He'd taken a step toward her, but now he held his ground. And she'd never seen his eyes so cold, so distant, so . . . dead. Not even when they'd first met, on her birthday, in the lab. He turned those dead eyes to Dorian—who had scuttled away—then to her, then to the stake in her hand.

Natalie told her fingers to release the stake, to let it drop to the floor. But there was something about Nick's eyes and his manner that sent a shiver through her. She'd never seen him like this—no, not quite . . . it wasn't unlike the time he'd tried the twelve step program and had felt betrayed. He'd had so much blood that night, *too* much blood—his eyes the same red-gold they were now. Whereas over-feeding made Dorian seem more self-assured, more confident, Nick seemed more . . . dangerous. And much less human.

So the stake stayed in her hand, which she fought to keep from trembling. No fear. She couldn't show any fear, as she walked toward him. "This has to stop," she told him, her voice containing an edge that he could take any way he wanted. Then she looked to Dorian, including him in the conversation. "You don't know what you're doing."

Dorian moved toward her, passing Nick and the stake he held, without a second thought. "Go! It's too late. We have to finish this."

"It's not too late." Natalie looked at Nick over Dorian's shoulder. "It's *never* too late." She saw Nick flinch at her words. And when he looked back at her—was that doubt in his eyes? But . . . how could he *ever* doubt her?

Dorian took her hands in his, his fingers closing around her fist as she held the stake. There was still some red fire in his eyes, but he seemed tired. His hands and most of his suit were covered with animal blood. "Dr. Lambert, please . . . go. For your own sake."

Natalie looked down at her hands in his and realized that the blood had been passed to her. The smell of the stuff twisted her stomach. But she fought that, needing to tell them what was happening, what was *really* happening.

"Save your breath," said Nick. "Natalie's never listened to me, why should you be any different? But, then . . . you *are* different, aren't you?"

As if burned, she pulled her hands from Dorian's grasp, her fingers tightening again around the stake. But she knew the rules of the game, now—Nick was hurting, so he hurt back. Well, this time, she wasn't going to play. He'd moved forward, closing the distance between Dorian and himself, so Natalie stepped between them, making certain both of them were very aware of the stake in her hands. "No. Nick, I said it stops, now. And I mean it."

His eyes fell to the stake, then rose to met her gaze. And the smile that slipped across his lips chilled her soul—they both knew he could snap her neck before she could do him any damage. But she kept her backbone ramrod straight and faced him down. And something of the sharpness in his gaze seemed to disappear as he saw her, really saw her.

She had hope there, for an instant. Then, he looked past her, to Dorian. And any opening, any softness she'd seen in him was buried by darker, deeper feelings. "I was worried about you." Nick's eyes were still on Dorian, but his empty, emotionless words were for her. "You left with him—"

His eyes met hers, in accusation this time. Natalie had hope again. Despite the neutral tone of voice, she heard the hurt in him, the fear not only for her safety, but of her betrayal. She knew from experience that Nick didn't trust too deeply, too often. But, when he did, he trusted with his heart.

Natalie didn't dare close her eyes, or look away. But she had no words to placate him. She'd gone with Dorian because, well, he'd *asked*. He'd seemed so helpless, in such danger. And after what Nick had said, about wanting Dorian dead . . . .

She knew exactly how it looked—she'd defected to the other side. There'd be no explanation she could give him, in that stark black-and-white, truth-or-lie world in which he lived that he'd be able to accept right now. Later, perhaps, after he'd thought about it. In ten years, or twenty, or a hundred. But now was what counted.

"Don't be an idiot!" hissed Dorian, with such ferocity, that they both turned to stare at him. "You think she came with me *willingly*? I threatened your life. I told her I might spare you." Looking away, he shrugged. "I needed someone to watch over me, for the day. And since

you'd taken Vivian—"

Natalie swallowed the lump in her throat, but it wouldn't go away. Nor would Dorian look at her and she knew damned well why—he'd just told a lie. And not just any old lie, but a one-hundred percent, nickel plated whopper.

Dorian had *lied*. So that Nick wouldn't doubt her.

Her heart felt like a hammer in her chest. Daring a glance back at Nick, she saw that he'd moved closer to her. And, like he'd taken off a coat, the air of menace, of fear, of doubt, had gone from him. His eyes held undeserved apology, his half-smile . . . relief and an attempt to atone for his well-founded doubt. Nick *believed* Dorian.

But she still couldn't get past the fact that Dorian had *lied*. When she looked back at him again, he finally met her eyes. She opened her mouth, ready to tell Nick just what Dorian had done, to take that burden from his shoulders, but he shook his head ever so slightly, eyes narrowing, as he half-nodded toward Nick. "No, Mouse-Mouse. You're quit of this. Let us finish what we've started."

There was a sound from somewhere—she knew Nick heard it because he moved his head, looking up, then back to the area beneath the overhang from the upper door. But Natalie didn't care—she was outraged by their need to protect her, their arrogance in assuming that she *needed* protection, and her inability to get either one of them to listen to common sense.

"Don't give me that crap!" she said, shaking her finger at Dorian, whose eyes widened in surprise. "I've had enough of that from him—" she pointed back toward Nick and glared at him so fiercely, that he backed up a step. "If you want to pretend that we're so helpless and weak, fine! But this mortal's gonna give you a piece of her mind *and* tell you what your excess testosterone is keeping you from seeing. If you still want to beat the crap out of one another after I'm done—go right ahead. Because I don't want anything to do with *either* one of you empty-headed, blood-sucking, self-righteous, arrogant macho-stud *vampires*!"

Nick blinked. Then blinked again. And smiled. He looked past her, at Dorian. "I think we've just been read the riot act."

There wasn't any menace in his comment. And while Natalie glared at both of them in turn, Dorian nodded his head, as if in agreement. "All right. A truce. Until Dr. Lambert's had her say?"

"I . . . think we'd better—"

"Yeah, you'd *better*," countered Natalie, still glaring at Nick. Then, when she realized she'd done just what she'd intended—gotten their attention and broken some of the tension in the room—she sighed and gave him a slightly embarrassed smile of apology. "Sorry. But . . . you weren't listening. And this has to stop, because you've both been conned." Natalie looked back at Dorian. "I thought a lot about what you said last night, about Nick doing exactly what the Enforcers wanted." At the slight sound from Nick, she met his gaze. "I think you were right . . . but *I* was right, too. Nick doesn't know—"

"Know *what*?" he asked suspiciously.

"Because they've been using someone else to feed him informa—"

The hiss was loud and audible, like a lit fuse on a stick of dynamite, amplified. Natalie stopped in mid-word, staring as first one, then two, then three separate sets of gray fumes started to spurt into the air around them. It took her a moment to realize what the gray smoke meant, until Nick wrinkled his nose and started to cough and Dorian did the same, crying, "Gas! Again!"

The garlic gas! Which, if Vivian was behind it, meant Vivian was here. Standing in front of Dorian, but closer to Nick, Natalie moved toward him, to ask him where he'd last seen Vivian. Then she heard a faint snapping sound, followed by a metallic twang. As she looked at Nick, his eyes widened.

"Down!" he cried, diving at her, pushing her backward.

Natalie fell, knocking into Dorian, and they both tumbled to the floor in a tangle. Her mind registered a dull 'thud' as Nick landed nearby. The garlic gas bombs were quickly covering the darkened interior of the abattoir in a gray mist, like a light fog. Only sudden, jarring contact with the floor told her that she'd landed and that was somewhat offset by the fact that Dorian hit first. But the smoke was rising and since the ceiling was high, there was still some air near the floor.

It was hard to resist the urge to sit up and take a look around, especially with Dorian hacking away. Crawling over to him, she saw a bruise on his forehead—he'd hit the concrete—but brushed that off knowing the healing properties of the vampire metabolism. "We've got to . . . get out," she told him, keeping her head low, beneath the fumes that were growing thicker and grayer with every passing second.

Having had experience with the gas, Dorian didn't try to answer, but nodded. He kept his head low to the floor and fought back the coughing—he didn't breath, didn't need to, but their reaction to garlic was so strong that even the scent brought on a gagging reflex, which meant drawing air into the lungs, which meant coughing . . . .

That's when she realized that she hadn't heard Nick. But, seeing his hand not far away, Natalie crawled over to him. He was lying face down on the floor. She touched his shoulder. "Nick?"

There was no response. And he was so still . . .

Natalie moved closer, dread falling over her like a mist. And she saw the stake protruding from his back.

Her first instinct was to sit up and scream. She sat up, but covered her mouth with her hands, so that no more than a muffled shriek escaped. But then her training kicked in. She scurried closer, still trying to keep low. His eyes were closed. When she opened the eyelid, there were no response, either to the movement or her call of

"Nick?" Moving around him, she checked out the location of the stake.

There was quite a bit of blood on and around him . . . although most of that was from his fight. But enough was wet for her to identify it as his. The stake had come close, very close, to his heart. And she wondered if close counted for vampires, as well as horseshoes and hand grenades.

But he hadn't dissolved or disappeared or turned to ash. He was simply . . . dead.

The gas was growing thicker and she was beginning to have trouble breathing. That, added to the tears in her eyes—from the gas, of course—was making it tough to get a good look at the situation. The problem was the stake. If he was dead, removing it couldn't hurt him. If he wasn't dead . . . but what else could she do?

Banking on the resiliency of vampires, Natalie placed her hand on the stake. When Nick didn't move, she placed her other hand atop that. But she couldn't get any purchase—it was slippery with blood, she was coughing and had to stop long enough to get below the gas and breath what was left of the fresh air. Placing her knee on his back, Natalie tightened her hands around the stake and pulled upward, with all of her might.

It shifted, perhaps as much as a half inch . . . but no farther. And Nick moaned.

She closed her eyes at the sound, giving a silent prayer to whatever powers watched over eight-hundred year old vampires and coroners who were crazy enough to get involved with them. Then she leaned down beside him. His eyes were still closed.

"Nick? It's Natalie. Can you—?"

His eyes shot open, filled with gold and red and pain, while his lips curled back into a snarl, showing fangs. He grabbed at her leg, caught her foot, and she threw herself back and away from him with a shriek, loosing her shoe in the process. But he couldn't move any farther, collapsing back into place like a puppet whose strings had been severed.

Dorian was at her side almost instantly, crawling on his hands and knees. "We've got . . . to get—"

"Nick." It was all she could manage, as she pointed at him, the stake still firmly imbedded in his back.

"Oh . . . my." Dorian crawled over to Nick and Natalie followed, the gas still billowing and hissing around them. Dorian touched the stake, brushing it lightly with his fingers and Nick moaned again, but this time the sound gave Natalie the shivers.

"Easy," muttered Dorian. "Crossbow. We'll have it out . . . in a moment." Then he gestured toward her to lean her head closer. "He's lucky. It didn't got through the heart completely—just off center. Some damage, though. Better move."

He managed that much in between bouts of coughing. Natalie stared at him, then down at the stake in Nick's back, until Dorian gently pushed her away. Then he placed both of his hands on the length of the stake and pulled upward.

There was a sucking sound and Nick's body jerked, as he released a scream or a howl, something more animal than human. Then he fell back against the concrete, his hand twitching. And . . . he coughed, making a burbling sound in his throat.

Her first instinct was to go to him, but Dorian blocked her, catching her in his arms. "No—he's dangerous . . . now." He lowered his head, coughing, as she continued to watch Nick over his shoulder. "He needs blood, badly," he whispered, close to her ear. "He'll attack anything at hand. Even you. We've got to get him out. This gas'll kill him, if—"

There was another twang and that metallic thud. Dorian threw his arms around Natalie and rolled with her, across the floor. A stake bounced off the concrete, where they'd been kneeling.

Before she could blink, Dorian had pushed her to her feet and was chasing after her, driving her into the thick, gray smoke. "Go! Go!"

But she waited for him, *had* to wait for him, as the gas overcame him and he stumbled, falling down to his knees if a fit of coughing. Praying that he wasn't about to vomit that three bottle meal of blood all over her, Natalie slipped beneath his arm and moved to the far side of the abattoir, away from the door. The gas was lighter there.

Natalie heard the hiss of another gas grenade—someone didn't want them to see what was going on. Or to find safety. Which was why she dropped Dorian behind the first available blood barrel she could find through touch, then fell to the floor beside him, self-consciously adjusting that green rag of a dress as it rode up on her and kicking off her other shoe.

"The door's blocked," she told him. "Is there another way out?"

This was an acid test—she counted on him to have not relied on Vivian for *everything*, particularly knowing where the exits were. Dorian looked up as she asked, pointing to the wall ahead of them. "Stairs, to the street."

"Go for it. I'll go back for Nick."

Natalie started up, but his hand clamped down on her shoulder like a vise, holding her in place. "Stakes can kill you, too. And . . . they don't have to hit a *mortal* heart."

He coughed again, which gave her a moment to consider. Nick was alive. He'd moved. Which was a good sign. But Dorian said the gas would kill Nick if he was left there. And if he didn't get blood . . . .

Then Dorian doubled over, coughing. And, as his hand came away, there was fresh blood on his lips and on the back of his hand. His golden eyes widened and he stared at it, surprised. Then he looked at her.

It was part of her training—triage. In an emergency, decisions had to be made as to who could be saved and who couldn't. She might go back into the gas, risk the stakes being shot at her, might get to Nick, but how could she pull him out by herself? She needed Dorian's help.

And that meant getting him out to fresh air. First, she could save Dorian. And if there was still time—

If there was still time . . . .

Again, she fell back to her professional demeanor. Slipping his arm around her shoulder again, Natalie headed toward the wall, where Dorian had indicated a door should be. They overturned another barrel of blood in their hunt for the wall through the gas, but reached it. And Dorian fell against the hard surface as she dragged him along, taking some of the weight from her shoulder. But with every step she took away from Nick, she felt her own burden grow heavier, especially around her heart.

There was a heavy metal door, the 'exit' light visible even through the gray fog. She tried the handle, found it locked, then Dorian pushed her aside and grabbed it. The metal twisted off in his hand, but the effort cost him. He fell back against the wall and slid down it, coughing so hard that fresh blood covered his lips and his hands.

Fighting back her revulsion, Natalie wrenched open the door, then grabbed his shoulder—which she guessed would be less slippery than his hand—and dragged him into the stairwell. There was smoke there as well, from a vent above the stairway door, but it was less than inside the abattoir. Dorian took a deep breath, trying to clear his lungs, then started for the stairs.

He slipped and careened into the wall, but Natalie caught him, grabbing hold of the handrail before his weight could pull them both off balance. They moved a few steps at a time, as the broken doorway allowed more gray smoke to billow in after them. There were two flights of stairs. And, at the bottom, even though the air was clear and relatively free of smoke, Dorian wrenched open the fire door and hurried outside, collapsing onto the concrete sidewalk, coughing.

Natalie knelt beside him, pleased to find that he didn't seem to be coughing up any more blood—she still wasn't certain whether the discharge was from his lungs or from his dinner. Then, she looked back at the building and swallowed, hard. It was time for her to get Nick.

But Dorian had recovered sufficiently to grab her arm. "Don't forget—our Enforcer friend with the crossbow . . . is still there."

She couldn't shake off his grip, so she stared at him, willing him to let her go, to let her save Nick. "*Not* an Enforcer," she informed him, in a cold, hard tone. "Vivian."

His eyes widened and he stared at her, as if he hadn't heard her correctly. "What?"

"It's been Vivian all along." Natalie frowned, that stupid stare annoying her. "That's what I wanted to tell you . . . *and* Nick. She's been lying to you all along. Because she can, can't she? Vampires can't lie to you, but mortals *can*."

As he sat there, in the spring evening, in the clean air, Dorian's eyes had reverted, going dark again. They narrowed at her observation. "Yes. That's my secret. One of them, anyway." Then, he closed his eyes and fell back, flat against the concrete, so quickly that Natalie thought he'd fainted. But she realized, after a second, that he was laughing. "*Cherchez la femme,*" he said, between gasps. "What a stupid old man I've become. I thought I'd saved her from the Enforcers. So was so frightened, so pretty, so loving . . . ."

The laughter died away as he spoke. And there was such sorrow in his final words that Natalie winced. "Dorian . . . I'm sorry."

Those dark eyes opened and he sat up, startling her. "*You're* sorry?" But then he looked away, frowning. "Actually, I should be apologizing to Nick. It's a comfort to know I'm not the only vampire whose head could be turned by a pretty face and a willing mortal smile."

Natalie looked to the stairwell, then back at him. "Nick may be dead."

"Or not. He's strong. And it's night. If this had happened in daylight—?" Dorian shook his head, then rose to his feet, still staring at the open door to the stairs. "If Vivian's working for the Enforcers, they may be here. They might even be waiting for us inside."

Natalie climbed to her feet. "The gas—?"

"You're right. But there's still the back side of the building—if they're waiting for us, we can catch them off guard. Down this alley—" Dorian took a few steps, still wobbly. Natalie ducked under his arm to support him and he looked down. "What happened to your shoes?"

"Nick got one. I . . . lost the other one."

"There could be glass out here. I should carry you." But he smiled, as her lips froze into a frown. "Yes, I suppose you're right—I'd only drop you, after all. This way."

Natalie hopped along the cool concrete—it was only early spring after all and what was left of her stockings didn't seem to extend to the soles of her feet—beside Dorian as they moved across the front of the building, to the paved side alley. When they'd reached the rear of the building, and the fire escapes, she looked up and saw that the door to the abattoir was open, billowing gray smoke.

Then she almost tripped over Dorian. He squatted down beneath the fire escape, touching his fingers to the tar. "Blood," he explained, showing her his fingers.

But his hands were covered with animal blood, his own blood, Nick's blood—she'd take his word for it. Natalie watched as he touched it to his lips.

"Vampire," he pronounced, after a pause.

"Nick?"

It was the only answer, but he didn't belittle her. Instead, he rose to his feet and looked up at the fire escape above them. "Vivian's trying to save him. My guess is that she was aiming at me, or you, and Nick got caught by mistake. But she'd have had to fly to get him down from there." Then, Dorian's eyes went wide and he lost his balance, grabbing Natalie's shoulder and leaning heavily on her for support. "Damn garlic," he announced. "Can't keep my head clear!"

Before she could move, his lips brushed against her ear, in a whisper. "We're being watched."

Natalie felt a chill steal over her, but she continued

to pretend to support him. Dorian's eyes closed and he shook his head slightly, still whispering as he added, "There's something—no . . . it's like someone's trying to block me. Nick is . . . ." His eyes opened and he straightened. "Nick's gone—he's not here. And whoever was watching us has run off."

"The Enforcers?" she asked, with just enough hesitation to cause him to glance at her sharply.

"No. I know what they're like. This was . . . almost familiar. Maybe I'm just getting echoes of Nick."

"His car!" Natalie headed across the blacktop at a run, ignoring the pebbles and bits of hard things that she felt beneath her feet. As she rounded the corner, where the cars had been parked, she slowed, then stopped.

The Caddy was gone. And Dorian's rental had crossbow bolts imbedded in a front and rear tire.

"Damn," said Dorian, suddenly beside her. "There goes my insurance again. Why can't they just let the air out? It works just as well." Moving past her, he pulled a bolt from the tire and it hissed, releasing what little air was left. "We've got to follow them."

"Where?" asked Natalie. "Where could Vivian go?"

Dorian winced when she mentioned Vivian's name, but he remained crouched by the tire, the crossbow bolt still in his hand. "He'll need blood. The Raven?" But he shook his head, dismissing his own answer. "No—somewhere more secure. Where she can control him."

"The loft?" When Dorian looked over his shoulder at her, Natalie added, "He's got cow blood on hand."

Rising to his feet, he tossed the bolt to the ground. "Yes."

"But why didn't she leave him here? Why would she want to save Nick?"

He frowned, walking back to her. "I assume Vivian's made a deal with the Enforcers—she delivers me to them and they bring her across."

Natalie met his eyes. "That's my guess."

"It's a good one. But a bad deal. I would have thought her brighter than that. An Enforcer as a master would be . . . difficult. And it would be impossible to act as Archivist if she were under the Enforcers' control. You need independence in this job. That's one of the reasons they chose me—my master had been destroyed." He looked away, quickly. "Unless . . . . "

Natalie knew exactly where he was heading. "Vivian wants Nick to turn her."

"Yes." Dorian nodded, then met her gaze again. "Then, she'll destroy him or let him die." He sighed and shook his head. "That's a dangerous game to play. If he's too close to death or in too much pain, he just may kill her. Or he might not have enough strength to bring her across."

"He won't bite her."

"No?"

There was a disbelieving edge to Dorian's voice that made Natalie frown. "Nick hasn't killed anyone for blood in over a hundred years."

He raised an eyebrow in surprise. "I hope we have a chance to do a proper interview. The more I learn about your Nick, the more I need to learn." But then he looked away. "If he won't turn her, Vivian *will* kill him. It's the only way she'll be able to justify her actions to the Enforcers."

"We have to get to the loft." Natalie walked to the car and unlocked the door, slinging her purse strap over one shoulder and hanging onto her medical bag.

But Dorian gestured toward the rental car as she closed the door. "Our car's been staked. And we can't call a taxi looking like *this*."

Natalie looked down at herself, then at Dorian. They both had so much blood on them. And it turned her stomach to think that any part of it might have belonged to Nick. "Right."

"I'll fly." Dorian looked up at the sky, then back to her. "Tell me where the loft is from here."

Natalie walked up to him. "You're taking me with you."

"No."

"If you'd taken me here earlier, this wouldn't have happened. I wouldn't have had to waste so much time getting through to you, and Nick would be—" She swallowed, feeling that lump rise in her throat. "Dammit, Dorian, we're talking about saving *Nick*! This doesn't have anything to do with your Code."

His eyes narrowed and she saw a gleam of gold in the depths. "And if the Enforcers are there?"

It was back to that old game of 'let's scare the mortal.' But she was learning the rules. Meeting his gaze evenly, Natalie said, "Screw the Enforcers."

His eyes widened and he smiled. "Brave words, Mouse-Mouse." But then he looked to the sky again. "Do you trust me enough to fly with me?"

And, just then, Natalie hesitated, following his gaze upward, to the night sky. Because . . . she didn't know how to answer.

"You've never flown with Nick?"

It was safer to look up, at the stars among the darkness. Fly with *Nick*? As if she'd ever get the chance, now . . . . "He never offered."

Dorian touched her shoulder, startling her. She found herself staring into those coal black eyes, still tinted with red, as he said, "Dr. Lambert—I want you to surrender your will to me. Bond with me, temporarily."

"No." Her answer was instantaneous and forceful. Natalie shook her head, emphasizing the point. "No."

"I can't take the chance of you panicking and killing us both. And where would that leave Nick?"

Natalie wanted to swear up and down on any stack of Bibles he wanted to produce that she wouldn't panic. She'd flown before—in airplanes, of course—so she had no reason to believe . . . .

But, in reality, she had every reason to believe in sheer panic as a viable option. Why lie? It *was* possible. And she was wasting time. Nick could be dying. Or dead.

But . . . to surrender her will?

"All right."

Dorian hesitated, as if surprised that she'd given in that easily. His lips curled into an uneasy smile and he looked away. "I'm flattered that you trust me that much. Or . . . are you so willing to take the risk to save him?'

When he looked back, she found she could answer. Because this one was easy. "Both."

Cupping her chin with his hand, Dorian's smile seemed more secure . . . and tender. "Such a true heart, Mouse-Mouse." But then the smile fell from his lips. "Listen to my voice, Dr. Lambert. Listen to the beating of your heart. Can you hear it? Good. Now—don't fight! Just listen, and look into my eyes. Can you hear me? I know you can hear me—"

It was like a mist fell over her, like she was being smothered and surrounded by a warm blanket. Natalie stared into his eyes, with their flecks of red and gold, and found that Dorian was everything, the center of her universe. He took her medical bag from her, then she placed her arms around his neck, as he instructed. His arms moved around her, hands clasped together in the small of her back, holding the handle of her bag. All the while, he spoke to her, with words that made no sense, that drifted beyond her capacity for thought or understanding. When her feet lifted from the ground and they soared skyward, she barely noticed. All she knew was that Dorian was there and his arms were around her.

There was something, though, in the back of her mind, nagging at her—something about what Nick was going to think, when he found out what she'd done. And the thought disturbed her until she realized that she couldn't remember who this Nick person was—

Nor did she care.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

RESTING his head and his weight against the wall of the elevator, Nick closed his eyes. Flames erupted in his mind, tongues of fire and heat and danger, as he saw his loft burning again. LaCroix had been there. And Alyce.

'How long is the longest friendship . . . .?'

But this fire burned in his chest, pain such as he hadn't felt in centuries. First there'd been the fear, the sound of a crossbow identified from memory, pushing Natalie down, out of the way. Then that sharp pain. And then . . . .

Nothingness. He shivered and opened his eyes, needing to stare at something other than the blackness inside his eyelids or the flames of memory. There'd been no sense of time or space or place or feeling. But then the world had started again, in a red roar of agony, his nose and lungs tormented by heavy, garlic fumes.

Unable to keep his eyes open, Nick slipped further down the wall, his hand grappling for purchase and finding nothing to hang onto. His perfect memory was failing him—it was all a blur. LaCroix had been there before . . . but was he here now? Was the laughter that rang in his ears only a memory?

'You don't know what you want. You've never known.'

He wanted . . . revenge. He wanted this pain to end, to stop tearing at him. He wanted, *needed* blood.

There was a heart beating, strong and steady. Looking down, he opened his eyes, and found Vivian holding up his shoulder, supporting him. She was spattered with blood and smelled heavily of garlic—so did he, for that matter—but he could feel the life, the heat, the blood within her. Within his reach.

His chest burned. Nick threw his head back and the collision with the wall left him gasping. He was healing. He *knew* he was healing . . . . but it hurt. It wasn't supposed to hurt.

And that's when he realized how badly he'd been wounded. He'd died, *died*, when he'd entered that cold darkness. Images flashed before his eyes—Janette in his arms, Carlotta in the garden, and Dorian . . . .

"Nick!" A slap across his face awakened him. He started to snarl, feeling his fangs fall into place, but he fought back that instinct when he realized he was staring at Vivian. "It's okay, I'm here." He turned his head away, knowing his eyes had gone gold, but she touched his cheek with her free hand, forcing her eyes to meet his. There wasn't any fear in her. "I'll take care of you. Just . . . focus. *Concentrate.* You'll get through this."

The elevator stopped moving with a slight jolt, but that was enough to send pain stabbing through him again. He lurched toward the doors as they opened, and into the loft. Nick grabbed onto the piano, his blood-covered hands slipping over the black surface, leaving streaks. He was home. He was *home.*

Vivian stood behind him, her free hand on his arm, supporting him. "You need blood."

He wasn't about to argue. She didn't know how close she'd come to losing her life in the elevator. "Refrige—" was all he could manage through clenched teeth, as another wave of pain swept through him.

"Right. I—ooooh!"

Nick turned as the sudden sound of surprise escaped her. The room swam before his eyes—there were two of everything. Including the bottles of blood, broken on his kitchen floor.

Vivian held onto him tightly, but Nick pushed her away and staggered to the wall, staring down at the mess in disbelief. Most of the crimson puddles were covered with a dirty brown crust, which meant this had been done last night. And he didn't need to count to know that all of his blood, even the bags, had been destroyed.

He was dead. Without the blood . . . he was dead.

His hands started to slide down the wall and Nick fell to his knees. He knew who to blame for this, for all of this . . . .

"Dorian!"

But then Vivian was beside him, holding him, whispering in his ear, "No, it's all right. Come with me. Come with me. I told you, I'll take care of you."

There was no strength left in him, but, somehow, Vivian coaxed him into standing again, then supported his weight until he could fall on the couch. She lifted his legs up onto the cushions. The pain eased slightly, now that he was lying down. Nick closed his eyes, sinking into darkness, feeling the cold worrying at him, draining his life.

Behind his eyes, the fire raged. He heard LaCroix laughing, taunting him, telling him how weak he was, that he could save himself if he dared. And . . . there was something missing. The flames of the fire were cold, they shed no light. The light was missing.

His eyes opened and he found himself staring up at Vivian. "Nat?" he croaked.

"He has her. Dorian has her." She knelt down beside the couch and was stroking his cheek with the tips of her fingers. "He killed her, Nick. Natalie's dead."

The light was missing.

His eyes closed as he tried to remember—but there was so much pain. The sound of the crossbow, pushing Natalie out of the way, then the cold darkness . . . . There was a flicker of memory, of Nat's voice in his ear, as the darkness was driven back by the light. Red fire had flooded through him and he'd snarled, knowing that fresh blood, warm blood, was so close—

Nat.

Slowly, he forced his eyes open. Had *he* killed Nat, not Dorian? Was Vivian lying to him? "No," he whispered, suddenly realizing that blame didn't matter. If Nat was dead . . . if she *was* dead . . . .

"Dorian killed her," repeated Vivian. "And he's coming here to kill you. To kill *me.*"

The terror in her voice reached down the well into which he'd fallen. Nick forced his eyes to focus, forced himself to see her, to hear her words. Dorian was still alive. Dorian was going to kill them.

But Natalie was dead . . . .

There was something very old and very strong inside of him—the instinct for survival—that started to close the doors around his heart, around his feelings. Deal with it later. For now, he had to survive. He had to protect Vivian.

But Nat—

Deal with it later. Avenge her. Add her to the list. Add Natalie's name to the others that he'd cared for, whom Dorian had killed or abused. Add Natalie's name at the top—an innocent life that Dorian had no right to take from him. From *him.*

Some of his strength returned, fueled by anger. Nick tried to push himself to a seated position, but his body betrayed him and he fell back against the couch, gasping.

Vivian's hand was on his shoulder and she leaned close—her heartbeat sounded like a bass drum, pounding in his brain. "You need blood."

And Nick shook his head ever so slightly, the image of those broken bottles and torn plastic bags reaching through the fire in his mind and his body. "No blood. Gone. It's gone . . . ."

"But I'm here. Take me."

Eyes wide, he turned his head to stare at her. For a moment, he saw Alyce in her place—her face sweaty, dirty, the dampness of her skin shining in the light of the flames, the scents of pain and fear hanging around her like ghosts. Nick felt his fingernails tear into the leather covering of the couch, but he couldn't get away from that image of Alyce, couldn't shake it, shake away the sound of her voice.

Nick turned his head away from Vivian, pressing his cheek into the couch, a fire other than pain burning inside him. He could smell the blood on his clothing and his skin—animal blood, his own blood. The odor of the blood in the kitchen, rancid though it was, made his eyes roll back into his head. He closed his eyes, not daring to see the world, or Vivian, through that golden haze.

But LaCroix was there, standing behind the flames, in his mind. 'Mortals die. Does it really matter where or

when?'

The laughter, the taunting, the *hunger* . . . .

"No!" Nick opened his eyes, expelling a breath—which became a snarl—then threw his arm across his eyes, hoping that he might find safety and sanity in nothingness. "No, no, no—"

Vivian's fingers brushed his face; he could feel the blood beneath her skin and turned his head away. "Take me, Nick," she whispered, her lips brushing against his ear. "Dorian's strong. It's the only way you can fight him."

He shivered, hearing Alyce's voice echoing Vivian's words. But he buried his face into the leather.

"It's all right. You can bring me across. I won't die." Her heart was beating steadily, quickly—he licked his lips, the sound enfolding him. "You need my blood to save yourself. To save me. To save Natalie."

He'd been so close to the edge, to the abyss—but his mind hadn't completely given over to the red fires of hunger and pain. Nick's eyes snapped open and he moved his arm from his face, staring up at his ceiling. Natalie? But . . . Natalie was *dead*. How could he save her if she was already dead?

Sense was drowned out by sensation, by that fierce heart beat. He didn't need to close his eyes to see the flames—his memories surrounded him, falling in upon him. Alyce, her skin shining in the firelight, LaCroix laughing and taunting. Somehow, Elizabeth was there, her cloak in flames. She leaned over him, half of her magnificent face burned away, so charred by fire so that he saw the gleam of the bone beneath the blackened skin in spots. And Richard, with blood on his hands and on his lips, laughing, laughing with Elizabeth and LaCroix, laughing at his weakness, at his foolishness, at his . . . humanity.

Nick closed his eyes and still he saw them. But he answered their taunts, saying, "No—not again. Never again." When he opened his eyes, he turned his face toward Vivian, knowing that he'd forced away the gold and the blood and the fangs and the violence, if only for that moment. "You don't know what you're asking me to do."

Vivian's blue eyes were no longer sympathetic and kind and caring, but grew icy and cold. "I *know* dammit! That's why I went to Dorian. But he wouldn't turn me. He was too weak." Then, she blinked, and a smile crossed her lips, her features softening as she leaned toward him again. "But you're strong, Nick. You could bring me across. You wouldn't bind me. I could do anything I wanted, *be* anything I wanted."

Her hands held his face, he couldn't turn away. Nor could he close his eyes—her heartbeat still pounded in his ears and the others jeered him from outside the flames that encircled him. But Nick drew strength, gazing into the cool, hard depths of her blue eyes, realizing that he was far more human, and humane, than she could ever be.

"You said—" he licked his lips, his voice nothing more than a harsh whisper, the hunger and the pain draining the moisture from him, in lieu of blood. "You said Dorian *wanted* to turn you. You said . . . ."

Her hands moved away from his face and she leaned back. The distance lessened the pounding in Nick's brain and he dared to close his eyes for a second—but the flames were still there and his lids snapped open almost immediately.

"What's *wrong* with me?" demanded Vivian. She rose to her feet and stood over him, hands on hips. "What—aren't I *good* enough to be part of your damn club? Well, to hell with you! To hell with *all* of you!" She shifted to one side, picking up something from his coffee table.

He didn't realize what it was until she lunged at him—a wooden stake, sharpened at one end to a fine point. Vivian's momentum carried her downward, toward his chest, but Nick's left hand caught her shoulder, preventing her from getting any closer to him. His right hand moved to her throat and neck. But he could feel the blood beneath her skin, no matter how he shifted his fingers.

Nick couldn't concentrate—it was too much of an effort, holding the stake away and not ripping her throat out with his fingernails and teeth. One quick jab and it would be over—either way. And, either way, he'd lose.

He closed his eyes, not knowing how long his strength would last, how long this stand-off could continue. The mad light in Vivian's blue eyes repulsed him. But inside, behind his own eyes, the flames still burned and laughter drowned out all sound, even the pounding of Vivian's heart.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THERE WAS solid ground beneath her feet again.

The thought was very dim and far away, but it was there. And it was also the only thing that parted the mist in Natalie's brain, as she continued to stare into Dorian's eyes. The night and the breeze and the stars had brushed past her, over her. But she was still trapped in darkness.

"We've arrived, Mouse-Mouse." Dorian released her and placed her bag on the ground. "Time to awaken." Then, he touched her cheek with the tips of his fingers.

Natalie started, then shook her head. It had been . . . an odd feeling. Like she didn't really have control over her own mind. Her world, her universe, had centered on Dorian.

"Not an unpleasant situation," he commented, a slight smile on his lips. "At least, from my point of view."

Her eyes widened—he was reading her mind. She raised her hand to strike him, but he caught her wrist, preventing the blow. Inwardly, Natalie shivered, but she met his eyes with a fierce gaze and mentally told him, in no uncertain terms, exactly how she felt about his having taken advantage of her.

Dorian released her wrist, still smiling. "You can try again, if you'd like."

Deciding to take him up on it, Natalie raised the flat of her hand, planning to wipe that smile from his face, but . . . she couldn't slap him. Her hand wouldn't move, it was frozen in mid-air. And it stayed there, until Dorian reached forward and intertwined his fingers through hers. Only then was her arm again under her control. Natalie snatched her hand back roughly, out of his grasp, and cradled it against her chest.

"*Now* you begin to understand just how dangerous we are," said Dorian.

She stared at him, swallowing. "Yeah. Maybe . . . maybe I do. Now."

"Good." He turned and looked up at the loft windows—the shutters were open and the lights were on. "We're in time, I think."

"When will—when will this be gone?"

"The bond?" He continued to stare upward at the loft, head cocked to one side, as if he were listening to something she couldn't hear. "When I release you."

"Then release me, now."

Dorian turned his eyes and full attention to her and she found herself engulfed by the hard, cold gaze of the Archivist. "When we're done. Not before." Suddenly, he looked back at the windows, almost absently waving with his hand toward the elevator and the keypad. "I'll see you upstairs."

"But aren't you—?" She'd looked to where he'd pointed, but as she turned back, he was already moving up, into the air.

Knowing that she wasn't about to take that particular route, Natalie picked up her medical bag and ran to the keypad, her bare feet slapping against the concrete walk. She winced as she heard the crash of glass—Dorian had gone through one of the windows—then turned her attention to the entry code. She had no idea what would happen if she left Nick and Dorian alone for long and she didn't plan on finding out.

Her fingers had punched in two numbers before she frowned and hit the cancel key—Nick had changed the numbers the other night. In the past, he'd always given her the code, usually basing it on something she could remember easily enough. Five digits—what five digits could he have chosen?

A woman's scream—Vivian?—from the loft, echoed through the broken window. Instantly, Natalie's fingers raced across the keys, typing in her office phone extension.

No luck. That was followed by her office phone number. Which didn't work either. She had a key to the stairwell and seriously considered trying to find it in her purse or maybe force the door if she had to, when she thought of one last five-digit number that Nick might have counted on her remembering, coming up with on her own if he didn't have a chance to tell her.

Holding her breath, Natalie punched in the numbers.

The lock of the elevator buzzed and the door opened. Heart in her throat, Natalie slipped inside. The number he'd chosen was her birthday. Nick had changed the number yesterday, before he knew she'd gone to see Dorian against his wishes, before he'd begun to doubt her. So much had happened since then . . . .

There wasn't much light in the elevator, but enough to see smears of blood along the walls in the corner. Huffing impatiently—the elevator had never taken this long before—she matched her fingers to a bloody hand print. The movement was instinct—checking the crime scene print to get the position of the hand that made it, a guesstimate of size. It was larger than her own, the lines clear—which meant weight had been pressed against it.

Nick. He'd made it this far. She consoled herself with the thought that if he'd managed to get back to the loft, and the bottles in his refrigerator, he'd be fine.

Natalie was assaulted by the stench of blood when the elevator door opened. Stepping into the loft, she saw Dorian standing by the fireplace, snarling, a stake in his hand. Vivian was unconscious in his arms, her feet dragging on the floor, which was covered with broken glass from the window. Nick was facing Dorian, almost doubled over, but all fangs and yellow eyes. There was a gaping hole in the back of his jacket, which was stained bright red and glistened with wet blood.

Discarding her purse, Natalie barely noted the disaster on the kitchen floor, filing the information away quickly before tightening her hold on her medical bag and starting forward. "Nick!"

He whirled at his name, nearly falling before he got both hands on the arm of the couch, then snarled again, at her. Natalie stopped in her tracks, eyes wide, as Nick tried to take a step toward her, hissing, *"Faux coeur!"*

Immediately, she looked to Dorian. His eyes were black and he'd unceremoniously released his hold on Vivian, who'd tumbled to the floor in a limp pile. He gestured toward Nick with the stake. "Go to him."

"Nick?" Natalie took a tentative step forward and when he didn't move, another. "You need help. I'm here to help you, Nick. All right?"

Releasing his hold on the couch, he swung at her with one hand, as if trying to grab hold of her. *"Faux coeur,"* he repeated. *"Faux jour!"*

With a gasp, Natalie jumped back, her eyes moving to Dorian again. And, as if Dorian had spoken to her, she saw the answer in his eyes—Nick was treating her this way because he knew something had changed. Somehow, he *knew* that she was connected to Dorian. Swallowing, she looked back to those fierce golden eyes, not knowing what to say, how to speak to him, how to tell him that she'd done what she'd done for *him*.

She didn't know what to do, but she knew they couldn't stand like that all night. She had no idea what was keeping Nick on his feet. And just as Natalie steeled herself to move toward him again, Dorian raised the flat of the stake and slapped Nick across the side of the head.

"No!" Natalie dashed forward as Nick fell against the couch, to the floor. She dropped to her knees beside him, using her case to brush away the larger fragments of glass on the floor, then glanced over her shoulder angrily, at Dorian. "That wasn't necessary!"

"Faux coeur," mimicked Dorian. He threw the stake onto the coffee table and folded his arms in defiance. "As if he could tell the difference."

"He's in pain. He doesn't know what he's doing." Ignoring Dorian—although she could feel his outrage and anger—she lightly touched the side of Nick's head, seeing some fresh crimson in his hair, which was already matted with drying blood. "Nick, let me help you," she said softly. "Just trust me, all right? It's Natalie. I won't hurt you. Trust me."

Her hands fell away as he turned his head. But when his eyes opened they were blue, not gold—not vampire, just Nick. He stared at her, his blood-covered hand reaching

up to touch her lip, then her cheek, as if he couldn't believe she was there. "Nat?"

His voice was soft and wounded, like a child who'd fallen and skinned a knee. Natalie put her palm to his cheek and he leaned into her touch, his eyes closing. "I'm here. It's all right." She took a deep breath, then released it slowly, looking over him as best she could. The hole in the back of his jacket was just about stake-sized. She had to get a look at the exit and entry wounds—sure, he'd heal, but she still wanted to make certain everything was all right.

Natalie took her hand from his face and reached down to open the medical bag. Nick's eyes shot open and he started, as if he was afraid she'd left him. One hand in the bag as she looked for the scissors, she tried to put on a confident smile. "It's okay. We'll just take this real slow, all right?" But the scissors weren't there. And she was just about to dump the contents on the floor and deal with it from another angle, when Dorian leaned down beside her.

"What do you need?"

Nick snarled. Without thought, Natalie reached across and slapped his face. "Stop that." There was no fear in her, she didn't even think to flinch at the snarl and that sudden golden gaze. Immediately, she regretted her action, when he looked down and away, eyes wounded.

But, first things first. Frowning at Dorian, she said, "I need you to get out of here."

He inclined his head slightly, towards Vivian. "No. Not yet. Besides, you'll need help with him."

"What I need help with is getting that coat and shirt off him." Again, she dug into her medical bag, but the scissors didn't seem to be there. "He's never been *this* bad before. Once—" She hesitated, pushing away the thought of Nick's battle with LaCroix, knowing Dorian could use that information against him. "I gave him a transfusion. It pulled him through."

"If he needs blood, why not let him take Vivian?"

Natalie stared at him coldly. "Why not just rip his heart out? Go ahead—you know where it is."

Dorian looked away, she saw the corners of his mouth turn upward, in a slight smile. Then he shook his head and rose, moving around her, behind Nick. "The first is easy." Before she could move, he grabbed the collar of Nick's jacket and ripped it, then tore the jacket and shirt in half with a quick movement.

But Dorian jostled Nick, as he tore the back section of the jacket and shirt away. Nick leaned heavily against her, a slight moan escaping him. She placed her hand in his hair, careful to avoid the wound caused by the stake, and let him rest against her. "Sssh! It's all right. You'll be fine. Just stay still."

There was a hole in Nick's back—it should have been larger, but it had already begun to close. And, as Natalie stared, she saw a single movement inside the cavity left by the stake. She gulped, as she realized she'd seen his heartbeat . . . she was looking at his *heart*.

"Magnificent, isn't it," said Dorian, tossing away the coat and jacket fragments, as he, too, looked at the wound. "It's amazing what we can do given time . . . and blood."

But Natalie forced herself to concentrate on the wound. At least with Nick she didn't have to worry about infection. And he *was* healing, although not quickly. "It looks clean enough," she muttered. "But he'll be better off lying down. And I need to check out the exit wound." Glancing up, she looked past Dorian. "He'll be fine on the couch, for a while. I'd feel better if I had something under him, but I don't have a clue as to where he keeps his spare linens. Can you get the sheets and blanket from his bed, upstairs?"

"Done."

Before she could blink, Dorian was gone, becoming nothing more than a blood-covered, garlic scented blur, as he flew up to the bedroom. Natalie turned her attention toward removing the remnants of Nick's shirt. "At least it's not bleeding," she said, half to herself. "You are one *very* lucky vampire."

She thought she saw the shadow of a smile on his lips. He turned his head to look at her, his lips parting as if to say something. His eyes widened.

Natalie was dragged back from her knees as a stick was slipped over her head, then pulled tightly against her throat, from behind. Automatically, her head tilted back and she gasped, her hands raised to either end of the stake. Vivian stood over her glaring down. "It's your fault! It would have worked, but you *had* to butt in, didn't you?"

As if from a distance, Natalie heard a low, throaty growl emanating from Nick. The stake was pulled tighter against her neck—she couldn't breathe, nor could she reach back far enough to grab Vivian. Even though she looked down as Vivian hauled her to her feet by pulling the stake upward, even though she could see nothing but the fierce golden gleam in Nick's eyes—those mad, furious, pain-filled eyes—there was only one thought in her mind, one word on her lips—

"Dorian!" she gasped.

Nick's eyes went red, flashing with fire. He was ready to lunge, but whether at her or Vivian, she wasn't entirely certain. In the state he was in, he might have killed one or both of them without thinking, unable to resist the hunger for blood, unable to deny himself the one thing that would heal his body . . . even if he lost what soul he'd regained in the process.

There was a flash from the top of the staircase, a sudden dark streak across the room. The next thing Natalie knew, she was lying on her back on the floor. Nick's paintbrushes were scattered around her; the can that had held them rolled away with a metallic ringing. Propping herself up on her elbows, she saw the coffee table had overturned. Vivian was seated in the black leather chair and Dorian leaned over her, speaking to her in a quiet voice. And Nick—

Was face down on the floor, trying to push himself up with his hands, but having little success.

Scrambling to her feet, Natalie went to him. She grabbed him beneath the arm, trying to help him, but he wrenched out of her grip and pushed himself upright to his knees. His eyes were closed tightly, his teeth were clenched. Nick turned his head away, leaning on the side of the couch for support.

Natalie swallowed and reached out to touch his shoulder. "Nick?"

But then another hand grabbed her own, from above. Dorian intertwined his fingers with hers and pulled her to her feet. "Give him room, Dr. Lambert," he said, in a soft tone.

"Room?"

"He's *hungry*." Dorian released her and walked back across the loft, collecting the sheets and blanket that he'd dropped during his sudden flight to save her. "You're all right."

It wasn't so much a question as a statement—Dorian *knew* she was fine. But she raised her hand to her throat, glancing around for the stake, which seemed to have disappeared during the struggle. "Other than a few splinters."

"Good." Dorian walked back to her and handed her the sheets and blanket, crumpled together in a ball. "I should have taken care of Vivian right away. I'm sorry."

At the mention of Vivian, Natalie turned to look back at the chair. Her blonde hair disheveled, blue eyes wide and sightless, Vivian had slumped in the seat. If her eyes hadn't been open, Natalie would have thought she was asleep.

"An oversight," commented Dorian, reading her mind again. "Vivian, close your eyes."

Vivian's lids shut at his command. Natalie shivered, trying to hide her sudden fear by disentangling the pieces of the bundle he'd passed to her. "That wasn't necessary, either."

"The fact that she just tried to kill you indicates otherwise." Dorian folded his arms. "But that's not what frightens you."

She knew she *could* lie to him—or could have if she hadn't been bonded to him. Natalie moved past Nick, careful to give him a wide berth, then tossed the fitted sheet over the couch. "You could do that to me, couldn't you?"

"Yes. Now."

She focused on arranging the sheet, willing her hands not to shake, not to show the fear that Dorian was probably reading loud and clear. But it was important that she act normally, that she pretend everything was just fine, that she was in complete and utter control of herself. The satin sheets, of course, were obstinate as hell. "If you slip off the couch, Nick, it's your own fault. Damn satin sheets! And *black*. But at least, the blood stains won't show—"

Natalie bit her lip after the last comment, then moved toward Nick. If she could get him to lie down, get a blanket on him, at least—she was pretty certain vampires weren't susceptible to physical shock. Mental shutdown was another matter entirely. But when she reached down toward him, Dorian said, "Stop."

And she did. She couldn't move a muscle, other than her eyes. Only when she looked up, meeting Dorian's dark gaze, was she free to move again. And she took a step backward, suddenly very angry . . . and more than a little afraid. "What?"

"I'll move him."

She looked down at Nick, then back at Dorian, wanting to tell him to get lost, that she'd take care of Nick on her own. But pragmatism won out, as she considered how exactly she was going to move Nick without setting off that bloodlust that he'd shown only a moment ago. She wasn't even certain she should touch him. But if Dorian went anywhere near him—

"All right," she said, relenting after a moment's pause. "But let me tell him."

Natalie wasn't certain that Nick was listening to them, that he was listening to anything. There was a faint sheen of red sweat on his forehead—he was concentrating so hard, wasting that bit of blood that his body needed to heal. She leaned down beside him, nervous at first, then suddenly felt very confident, very safe, knowing that she was protected—that Dorian would protect her.

He was feeding her those thoughts. She shot him a dirty glance over her shoulder, then turned her attention back to Nick. "We're going to move you to the couch. Dorian's going to move you to the couch so I can help you, okay?"

For a moment, she wasn't certain that he'd heard her. Then he nodded, ever so slightly, his eyelids still tightly closed.

"Good." Natalie raised her hand, wanting to touch him on the shoulder, to reassure him, but she didn't dare. Letting the hand fall back to her side, she stepped away, giving Dorian room to move.

Despite Nick's nod, he snarled when Dorian touched his shoulder. But his eyes remained closed, even as Dorian knelt down beside him and shifted Nick over his shoulder, in a fireman's carry. It was only a matter of seconds before Nick was lying on the couch and Dorian moved away.

Quickly, Natalie threw the sheet over Nick, then the blanket, leaving his chest bare. The remnants of his shirt had fallen off or shifted to one side when Dorian had picked him up and now she could see the exit wound plainly. It wasn't so long or wide as the hole in his back, but the edges were ragged, the skin knitting together far more slowly.

"All right?" asked Dorian.

"Yes. Thanks." She flashed him a quick smile, then flinched as Nick grabbed her wrist. Natalie looked up quickly, her gaze warning Dorian not to move, then faked a smile as she gazed down at Nick, despite the fierce grip on her arm.

His eyes were open, unfocused. "Nat?"

He was back to himself, at least for the moment. "I'm here," she answered, placing her free hand over the fingers that gripped her arm.

That helped—he lessened his grip, but didn't release her. His blue eyes were clear, almost unconcerned, as he met her gaze. "Am I dying?"

"You should be so lucky." She tightened her own grip on his hand. "You've got one hell of a lecture coming, when you get better." His fingers started to slide from her wrist, but she held his hand between her own as his eyes closed and he smiled weakly. "You're gonna be fine. Just . . . rest for a minute." Then, she turned her gaze to Dorian. "He's going to need a transfusion. Now."

"All right." He stalked over to the chair in which Vivian was resting and reached down to stroke her hair. When she shot upright in the seat as if suddenly awakened, and shifted away from him, Dorian grabbed a handful of her hair and pulled her closer to the side of the chair and himself. "I think we've found a willing donor. She can afford to lose a pint or two."

Vivian glared up at him. "The Enforcers—"

"Won't help you now." He leaned down, so that his dark, cold eyes were level with hers. "You've lost. You owe him a debt. You'll pay it in blood. And then . . . we'll talk about what you owe me." Releasing her, he turned to Natalie, ignoring Vivian's small, sputtered protests. "What else do you need?"

Natalie found herself staring at Vivian, unable to look away. There was a part of her, very deep inside, that wanted to hurt Vivian, break her in half for what she'd done to Nick, what she'd done to both of them. She had no idea what Vivian had told him and, with Nick being a clam about such things, she'd never know. But sympathy outweighed even her anger—especially as she watched Vivian cower against the chair, Dorian beside her.

As if in response to her thoughts, Dorian looked down at Vivian—there was sadness in his eyes. He reached out his hand to touch her hair again, more gently this time, and she flinched away from him, fear and anger mixed equally in her gaze.

Clearing her throat, Natalie fixed her eyes on Dorian, willing him to look at her. "I've got most of what I need in my bag. The rest's in my car—pretty standard stuff—but that's over at the office. Although . . . ." Frowning, she looked toward the broken window. "Nick's got a first-aid kit in his car—I'll need a few things from that."

"Ever resourceful," commented Dorian. "You're a credit to your mortality." Then he held out his hand to Vivian, snapping, "Keys?"

Sullenly, she reached into her pocket and took out Nick's car keys, which she hurled at him. Dorian snatched them from the air, then took a step toward her. "You're going to stay there and not move until I return. Do you understand?"

There wasn't time for her to look away, to avoid his gaze or his suggestion. Vivian's eyes glossed over as he stared at her, her will drained in seconds. "Yes."

Dorian paused for a moment, reaching again to touch Vivian's hair, his manner very tentative and careful. But then he turned and walked away. Natalie fully expected him to take the elevator, but he dove out the window, head first. And, for an instant, her eyes remained fixed to that broken window, something pulling at her, tugging a part of her with him when he left. When would he let her go? When would Dorian release her?

"Nat?"

She was still holding Nick's hand. Turning, she knelt down beside the couch. "I told you to rest. I'm still here. You'll be fine."

"Are you—?" His eyes searched hers and he frowned suspiciously. "Are *you* okay?"

"Great." Then, as his eyes narrowed, she smiled sheepishly and downgraded her statement. "Well . . . good. Considering I've ruined a $750.00 dress and I smell like a pizzeria."

He wrinkled his nose. "I didn't want to mention that." But then the smile faded and he stared at her so hard, she thought he might be looking through her. "Are you *sure*? Your eyes . . . ."

Natalie squeezed his hand and bit her lip lightly, although she tried her best to smile. When he'd been working on instinct, caught up in pain and anger, he'd known almost immediately what had happened to her. But now that his senses had returned, he wasn't certain . . . although he knew *something* was wrong. "I'm in better shape than you are. Promise."

"Don't . . . leave me."

For good? For now? He didn't elaborate, nor, as Natalie's heart leapt into her throat, did she want him to. "Wouldn't think of it," she answered lightly, squeezing his hand. "But if you ever pull this macho shit again—diving in front of a crossbow! You should've figured that one out a couple of centuries ago."

Nick smiled, despite the threat in her voice and closed his eyes again. "Good," whispered Natalie. "Rest." But the lump didn't leave her throat.

Behind her, she heard a choked sob, as Vivian wept aloud. Her neck hurt, where Vivian had tried to strangle her with the stake—that alone should have given her good reason for hating Vivian's guts.

There was also what Vivian had done to Nick, of course. And Dorian. But however much she tried to summon the righteous anger she knew should be somewhere inside her, she could find nothing more than an empty, cold place. Natalie couldn't imagine what could have driven Vivian to desire the thing that Nick was trying to escape. And, at this point, all she could feel for the broken woman was pity, one mortal to another, caught in a world of darkness and death and blood.

Then, she knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Dorian was standing behind her. There'd been no sound or creak of floor boards to betray his presence, but she knew he was there with the same certitude that the Earth

was round or that the sun would rise.

"Save your pity for those who deserve it," he said sharply, as he dropped the emergency medical kit to the floor beside her.

"You mean, like you?" Her hands perfectly steady, Natalie opened the case, ignoring him.

Dorian walked away, his shoes crunching the glass beneath his feet. He stood by the window, she could almost feel him staring out into the darkness—it sent a shiver through her, knowing so much without trying, without seeing. "He's lucky it's still early evening. He'll heal faster."

"Only if I can get some blood into him."

"What more do you need?"

A cannula in one hand, Natalie looked up from her own medical bag, then gestured toward the dining table. "Move that behind the couch, throw a blanket or something over it. And more blood would be nice. *Animal* blood."

"Cow, I suppose," sighed Dorian, as he moved the table as she requested. Then he walked to the phone and lifted it in his hand. "I'd better put in the request to dear Janette. I think I might get a speedier response than you."

"Or send her heading for the hills," muttered Natalie, beneath her breath. It didn't matter that he'd heard her. She didn't much care, at the moment. Her first priority was Nick and that transfusion.

She released Nick's hand as she rose to her feet. His eyelids were tightly closed again but they flickered, revealing specks of gold, as she stepped away. She touched her fingers to his shoulder lightly as she turned—a promise not to stray too far—then looked at Vivian.

There were tracks of tears on Vivian's face, but her blue eyes stared straight ahead, into nothingness. Her fist was raised to her mouth as she let out an occasional sob. There was no way to know what she was seeing, what she was thinking, but Natalie could easily guess it might have something to do with her immediate future, or lack of one.

She had just about everything she needed for an emergency transfusion . . . except for a willing donor. Cross-matching and testing wasn't a problem for vampires—she'd proven that before when she'd given him a pint of Schanke's blood on the fly. And the way his body had repaired and reconstituted itself on the night he'd first sat up on her dissection table . . . the crime scene photos had been even more explicit than the coroner attendant's description of Nick having been 'blown apart.' No, the technical aspects weren't going to be a problem.

It was that oath—the same one that had led her to work so frantically to save Dorian's life, even though she knew he and Nick were mortal enemies. Not that she was endangering Vivian's life, but to take blood from an unwilling donor, even in an emergency situation like this, made her queasy.

All the while, she'd heard Dorian's voice behind her, as he spoke on the phone. She couldn't distinguish words, but she knew when he'd finished. He said, "Vivian?"

It was horrible, the way she jerked to attention in the chair, like a puppet on strings.

"Tell Dr. Lambert that you want to donate blood to save Nick."

The blank blue eyes turned to her, the hand fell from the mouth. "Dr. Lambert, I want to donate blood to save Nick."

Natalie turned to Dorian and hissed angrily, "Don't *ever* do that again!"

He shrugged, replacing the receiver in the cradle, then walked toward her. "I didn't want your better self to get in the way of your clinical judgment." With a wave, he added, "That's fine, Vivian."

She sank back into the chair, but now her eyes had a flicker of life to them, especially as Dorian approached her. He leaned forward and lifted Vivian in his arms, out of the chair. "The table?"

Hurriedly, Natalie took the blanket from Nick and threw it over the dining table. Dorian followed her, gently lowering Vivian to the covered surface, then added, "You shouldn't feel guilty about this. It's one of the few reasons she's still breathing."

Natalie stared at him, then down at Vivian. For some reason, she seemed very calm, even if she no longer moved like an automaton at Dorian's command. Had she resigned herself to the vampire version of justice? Did she still hope for a reprieve—counting on Dorian's attachment to her? Or was he controlling Vivian in yet some other way?

She didn't want to think about it. Looking down at her hands, Natalie decided to brave the bloody kitchen floor—she wasn't going to endanger Vivian's life with poor hygiene. And if Nick had managed to wait for blood this long, he could wait a few minutes more. As an afterthought, she glanced over her shoulder. "What did Janette say?"

"That she'd make the delivery, personally. She wants to make certain I haven't destroyed Nick. I almost think she'll be disappointed to find out I've had a hand in saving him. She certainly *won't* be pleased to find that I've had to reschedule his interview."

Still barefoot, Natalie had carefully made her way around the other side of the kitchen, to the sink. She was about to reach for the faucet when Dorian mentioned rescheduling the interview. And she froze. "What? After all this?"

"I'm more determined than ever." He gestured toward Nick. "I've always considered him nothing more than LaCroix's guard dog. But . . . he's different. Despite his lies, there's something true within him, something that I haven't found in any other of our kind, something . . . ." He shrugged, words failing him.

"Something *human*?" Natalie didn't bother to hide the triumph or challenge in her tone, as she turned on the faucet.

"Yes," he admitted, a touch of reluctance in his voice. Dorian walked toward her, then allowed himself a wan

smile. "Human. And if he ever does manage to cross back over, I'll have you on your honor to contact me. I should be here to record the event, and its aftermath."

Natalie had concentrated on scrubbing the blood from her hands. "Only record?"

He cleared his throat, glancing away when she looked at him and met his gaze, evenly. At first he seemed to be looking at Vivian, but then he frowned and turned his eyes to the floor. "Nick's lucky, in that respect. I don't have someone like you, cheering me on from the other side. It's not an easy trip to attempt, without knowing that someone's waiting for you." His eyes, when he finally looked up at her, were almost hopeful.

The words came to her lips—that she'd be there for him, too, if he asked. But she bit down on them, knowing that they came not from her heart, but from the power he held over her. "Dorian, you have to let me go."

His frown indicated it wasn't the answer he'd anticipated. "Yes. But not yet." He turned away, looking across the room, to Vivian and the couch where Nick was resting. "Not just . . . yet."

And Natalie shivered, despite the warmth of the water that washed the pink soapy foam from her hands.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

NICK RAISED the glass of blood to his lips, sipped, and set it on the coffee table beside the couch. He stared down at the book that rested against his knees. Turning the page, he realized that he didn't remember a word of what he'd just read.

It didn't matter. Sighing, he leaned his head back against the arm of the couch, then winced, feeling a pull in his chest. He was still sore from the night before. The wound had healed, but he felt like he'd been hit by a freight train. And what he'd seen when he'd closed his eyes—

Absently, he touched his hand to the neck of his black bathrobe and sat up, looking around the apartment. Memories of night he'd destroyed LaCroix—fire everywhere—played over and over in his mind. LaCroix had laughed at him, at his weakness.

LaCroix would laugh now, knowing that he was sitting here, waiting for Dorian to arrive, waiting for his interview . . . waiting to be condemned. That lesson, at least, he'd learned well.

The buzzer sounded, then sounded again, repeated in several staccato beeps. Slamming the book closed, Nick rose to his feet and dropped it to the table. He tied his robe closed as he walked to the elevator monitor. Was it time? It was dark, certainly, but he hadn't expected Dorian yet. He'd hoped to get dressed before then—there was something undignified about facing final destruction in a bathrobe and pajamas.

He limped slightly on his way to the monitor. That would be gone by tomorrow night. Time and blood could heal almost anything he could do to himself—the centuries had taught him that. But he might no longer have the luxury of time. And as for what he'd done—and said—to others. . . .

Oddly enough, it was Schanke. "Yeah, Schank?"

"Hey, partner—you change your keycode again? I've got word on the Kenko case."

"Come on up." Nick hit the pass-thru button, then returned to the couch. As he seated himself, his hand brushed against a tear in the leather—had he done that? He didn't remember

much, from after the stake had hit him until he'd awakened on the couch, in the quiet of the loft. Dreams of fire and LaCroix had startled him awake, but he'd bitten back the cry of memory and of pain from his chest when he'd spotted Natalie asleep in the chair across from him.

The room had been dark and the air was redolent with the scent of garlic. He couldn't see her face, Natalie's head rested in the crook of her arm. Her green dress was torn, spattered with blood, and she wasn't wearing any shoes. He'd sat in the darkness, watching her, thinking of how vulnerable, how beautiful, she looked. And when he'd fallen asleep again, the fire and the vision of LaCroix hadn't tormented him.

He'd spent the day alone, drifting between sleep and an uneasy wakefulness, never wandering too far from the couch or the refrigerator. The machine took all of his calls. Dorian told him the interview was rescheduled for tonight. Natalie had left a message telling him he could shower only if the wound had healed and that she'd be by tonight, to check on him. And Janette's message had been frantic, fearful, and basically unintelligible, wandering in and out of a number of languages with which she was conversant but which he'd never bothered to learn.

Nick hadn't answered any of them. He wouldn't have had any idea of where to reach Dorian, even if he wanted to. Janette would have been asleep by the time he'd gotten her message—he simply wasn't up to speaking with her, calming her fears. And Natalie . . . he was still working on what he was going to say to Natalie.

He looked up at the sound of the elevator door, suddenly having second thoughts. It was traditional to spend some solitary time in reflection, before facing the executioner. But he'd spent enough of his life alone. And he needed something to take his mind off the interview. Schanke was often annoying and irritating, but he was always diverting. And . . . he was a friend.

Smirking, Schanke pointed at Nick as he entered. "Hate to tell you this, pal, but that *isn't* the way swinging bachelors are supposed to dress on their night off. Trust me on this one. I used to know."

"I assume Myra's burned all of your polyester leisure suits by now."

"Gave them to Goodwill. Hey, how'd you know?"

"Lucky guess." Nick shook his head, smiling. "Besides, I'm relaxing. It's my night off."

"Recuperating, more like." When Nick frowned, Schanke added, "Nat said you took a bad spill down your back stairs last night. She's right—you don't look so hot."

"I'm fine. Nat has a mother hen instinct." He started when Schanke picked up the glass of blood from the table, then moved forward quickly and snatched it out of his partner's hands.

"Yeah. But should you be drinking after taking a flying leap onto concrete?" Schanke wrinkled his nose. "What is it, anyway?"

"Protein drink," lied Nick. He winced, feeling a tightness in his chest. Realizing there was no place he could safely place the glass, he raised it to his lips and downed half of it.

Schanke made a face, then shrugged. "Mr. 'Special Diet,' himself. Don't you ever take a day off? Although—" He sniffed suspiciously, then started looking around. "Wait a minute—do I smell pizza?"

Nick finished the remains of the glass quickly, gasping, then placed it on the coffee table. "No pizza. And this *is* my day off," he informed Schanke. "So why are you here?"

"I figured you might forget what I looked like if I didn't drop by. No pizza, huh?" Disappointed, he shrugged, then sat down in the chair across from the couch. "Also wanted to let you know, Diane Osgood's plea bargaining on the Kenko case."

The taste of the cow blood still lingered on his lips. Nick leaned back against the couch, feeling the tightness in his chest ease slightly. "Manslaughter?"

"She claims it was an accident. They were arguing over that ivory thing—"

"The triptych," supplied Nick.

"Yeah. Kenko pulled, she pushed . . . ." Schanke threw up his hands. "We had the thing dusted for prints—Kenko's were on it, plain as day. And since she told you she'd never delivered it to him, we got her."

Nick met Schanke's eyes and shook his head. "That would never be enough to convict her."

"You know that. *I* know that. But when we brought her in on the warrant, she couldn't wait to talk. Said something about being tired of lying, tired of watching real things broken?" He shrugged, the explanation eluding him.

Nick clasped his hands together, remembering the picture of the disfigured ivory bishop and her reaction to it, almost understanding what had driven the woman to protecting what she thought was 'the real thing.' "What about the neighbors?"

"Did a second run-through of the floor. We can place her at the scene, if her lawyer gives her second thoughts about pleading guilty."

"No," said Nick, surprised at his own certitude. "She won't change her plea, no matter what her lawyer says."

Schanke's eyes widened. "You got a crystal ball? Or inside information you're not sharing?"

"Instinct. I spoke with her. She came in because she guessed we were on to her. She could've dumped the triptych—"

"Toss an antique worth *that* much?"

"She couldn't spend it in prison, Schank. Money wasn't what mattered. It was *real*, that was all she cared about. Now that it's safe," he shrugged, "she'll do her time."

"They should all be this easy. But not this weird." Then Schanke snapped his fingers and reached into his coat pocket. "Speaking of weird—Norma said downtown sent these over for you, since you didn't pick them up?"

Nick leaned forward carefully and took the envelope

Schanke held out to him. Once it was in his hand, he opened the flap. Two tickets to the Solicitor General's Dinner-Dance were inside. Not for tomorrow night, but the night after.

It could be a thousand nights after, for all the good it would do him. Even if he were still around, there was no chance Natalie would reconsider.

"You had me going for a while," needled Schanke. "Here I was, set to bring in Myra as the last straw, and you had plans the whole time. Norma said you sent over a check the day the announcement came through, months ago."

He threw the tickets onto the coffee table—looking at them made his chest feel tight and he suspected the pain had little to do with his recent wound. "I always buy one, you know that. PBA dinners, youth services, charity auctions . . . ."

"But you never go."

"They're good causes," protested Nick. He looked away, knowing that he couldn't get by with a lie on this one—Schanke was right. "Just because I'm on duty or busy doesn't mean I can't support them."

"Yeah. But you bought two, this time." Schanke grinned. "Maybe there was somebody else you were planning to not go with?"

"Maybe." The tight feeling was still in his chest, but his attention was caught by the sound of the elevator again. Nick rose to his feet, then glanced over at Schanke.

"You expecting company?"

"Yes." His eyes moved to the elevator door—it had to be Dorian. It was time for his interview. But then he looked back at Schanke. "Thanks for stopping by, for bringing me up to speed on the case."

"Well, there was kind of another reason I stopped by." Schanke looked away, which was, in and of itself, somewhat unnerving from such a straight-shooter. "There was some talk around the water cooler today, that maybe Natalie's seeing somebody." Through with the tough part, Schanke met his eyes again. "Sounds like it might be Dorian. And since you said there was bad blood between you—?"

Nick wanted to laugh aloud, at Schanke's attempts at broaching the subject oh-so-delicately. But he couldn't have managed a laugh if he'd tried. His expression was appropriately somber as he answered, "I know." When Schanke's eyes widened, he added, "I don't think I'll make it to the dance."

"You're not going to let a header down the back steps keep you—"

There was no way to explain, nothing he could say that would make sense and that Schanke wouldn't pursue. "Do me a favor?"

He managed to put enough of a plea in his tone to stop Schanke cold. "What?"

"Keep an eye on Nat for me?"

"At the dance?"

"Yeah." Nick managed a slight smile. "At the dance."

"You're sending her *stag*? Or . . . you think she'll take Dorian?" Puzzled, Schanke shook his head. "I don't—"

"But if she—if she *does*, just keep an eye on her for me. All right? As a favor?"

In the old days, he would have made Schanke swear an oath on a relic, on a sword, on his soul. But times were different. And just as those old oaths were so easily forsworn, he knew that Schanke's word, given in friendship, would carry through.

Still puzzled, Schanke nodded. "Yeah. Sure. But—"

The elevator door opened and Nick looked up, his heart in his throat. It wasn't Dorian, but Natalie, with a paper bag in her arms—he distinctly heard the sound of glass bottles clacking against one another. She smiled when she saw him. "You—sit down," she ordered, pointing to the couch. Then her eyes widened when she saw Schanke. "You—it's his night off. Leave him alone."

"Mother hen, nothing," whispered Schanke, to Nick. "*General* hen's more like it."

In response, Nick smiled, then walked toward Natalie and tried to take the bag from her. She twisted away and added firmly. "I mean it. Don't make me get rough."

Holding up his hands in surrender, he backed away. "Yes, ma'am."

"I thought you were on shift tonight," said Schanke, suspiciously. He moved closer to peer into the heavy bag she held, but Natalie moved it out from beneath his nose.

"I *am*—I'm on dinner. I just stopped by to make sure Nick's behaving himself and resting, like he's supposed to." After glancing at Nick, she turned a fierce gaze on Schanke. "What's your excuse?"

"We got a guilty plea to manslaughter on the Kenko case."

"Oh. Yeah." Natalie stared at him for a moment, then a slight smile crossed her lips and she glanced over at Nick, trying to hide her puzzlement—he realized that the last she'd heard, it was still a suspected smash-and-grab. "Good. One for us, then."

"And to drop off the tickets, for the Solicitor General's Dinner-Dance?"

Nick winced at the implication in Schanke's tone—he was trying to feel Natalie out about what was going on between them. But she didn't seem to notice. Doors shut behind her eyes at the mention of the dance and she carried the bags across the kitchen, moving away from them. "Well, Nick's not going anywhere for a couple of days. Not after . . . that fall."

"I was lucky Nat dropped by."

She looked at him over her shoulder at the comment, but there was something distant in her eyes, something . . . odd. "Yeah. Maybe."

Schanke's eyes were still suspicious. "Doesn't look like anything got broken."

Natalie turned back to the bag—he was almost

certain he saw her hand tremble. "I wouldn't say that. But . . . it wasn't anything that needed a hospital stay. Nick just shouldn't exert himself for a few days."

"Great." Schanke sighed. "That means I've got to cover the latest ATM shooting solo."

"You're a big boy, Schanke," said Natalie, seemingly occupied with the contents of the bag. "It'll be good for you to get out on your own, for a change."

But that bit of information had caught Nick's attention. "Another one?"

"Or the original." His partner shrugged. "The guy you picked up could have been the prime perp, or he could have been—"

"A copycat." Nick frowned and looked down. "We should see what the captain can give us. How many uniforms can we use for stakeouts?"

"My thoughts, exactly." Schanke nodded. "This guy's got favorite spots, right? So if we stake them out, on a rotating basis—"

"No shop!" said Natalie, suddenly stepping between them. Grabbing Schanke's shoulder, she turned him toward the elevator. "You—out!" She kept her hand on his back, pushing him toward the door. "I'll have the autopsy on your desk, first thing tomorrow—ballistics'll be able to tell you if you've got a copycat or the real thing. And *you*—" she turned on Nick, who'd been following them to the door. "I'm *not* dropping off a copy for you—so don't ask."

"That's some bedside manner you've got," complained Schanke.

"I'm an M.E. My patients don't usually talk back."

Schanke adjusted his tie. "Well, you treat them this badly and it's gonna happen."

There was something of the old Natalie in the glance she gave Nick, over her shoulder. "How do you know it hasn't?"

Just as he was about to reply, she paled and the light in her eyes dimmed. Natalie's glanced at the elevator door, then back at Nick, registering alarm and . . . recognition.

That's when he started to remember—Dorian had been standing by the broken window, Vivian in his arms. And then Natalie had entered. His memory held an image of her, tinted gold and red, the sound of his own snarl filling his ears as he'd looked in her eyes and seen . . . .

Natalie was bound to Dorian.

The shock of it was enough to send Nick reeling, but he held his ground. He knew that her reaction meant Dorian had arrived. Now was *not* the time to show weakness. As for Natalie—she was staring down at the floor, anywhere, just not at him, and looked up only when the elevator door opened.

Schanke didn't have a clue. He was about to step into the elevator as Dorian stepped out—they all but collided. Dorian glanced around, meeting Nick's eyes, smiling at Natalie, "Nick, Dr. Lambert—I hope I'm not intruding," then turning his attention to Schanke. "Detective Schanke—Don," he corrected himself. "This is an unexpected pleasure. Visiting the invalid?"

"Yeah." Schanke looked back toward Nick, raised an eyebrow, then put on an obviously forced smile. "Dorian. I thought you said you weren't going to be in town for long."

"A few days longer than I'd originally planned," said Dorian smoothly. "There were . . . complications in my schedule."

"Oh? Is Vivian still around? Myra, my wife, would get a real charge out of meeting her."

Dorian never flinched—at least to mortal eyes. But Nick was certain he saw the pale skin turn a shade whiter. "She's . . . dead to the world, I'm afraid. We had rather a busy night last night. But I'll pass along your regards."

"Sure, thanks." Then Schanke's eyes narrowed, as he looked over to Natalie. "I guess I should leave the introductions to Nick—it's his casa, right? But then . . . word has it you two already know each other pretty well."

Nick froze, not knowing what to do. Natalie's eyes were fixed on Dorian, although she managed a small, strangled sound from deep within her throat.

But Dorian smiled, glancing almost casually at Natalie. "Yes. Dr. Lambert was kind enough to help me the other night. Car trouble," he admitted. Then he held out his hand, shaking Schanke's. "Again, a pleasure to see you, Detective."

"Likewise." Schanke nodded almost coldly toward Natalie, then looked back at Nick, an eyebrow raised. "You need anything, give me a call. Anytime."

"Thanks, Schanke."

"Hey, that's what partners are for, right?" Stepping past Dorian, he entered the elevator.

Dorian's eyes remained neutral, fixed on the elevator until the door closed and Schanke had left. "He's a good man. A good partner?"

"Yes." Nick met Dorian's curious gaze fiercely. "A good friend."

"We haven't started the interview yet. It was only a question." He smiled at Natalie. "Is he always this taciturn?"

"Today's one of his better days." She turned her head so sharply, it was as if she was fighting to tear her gaze away from Dorian. But when she met Nick's eyes, she frowned and pointed toward the couch. "I thought I told you to sit. And I stopped by the Raven for . . . supplies."

Another flash of memory struck him—seeing the flames behind his closed eyes, yet hearing Natalie's voice beside him, her fingers on his shoulder, in his hair. And fighting the urge to sink his fangs into her flesh and take the blood from her.

Unsteady as he was, Nick headed for the couch, not quite knowing what was going on. "Janette would have dropped it off," he commented, "you shouldn't have bothered." He eased himself onto the couch and watched

Natalie, as she walked to the refrigerator and withdrew one of the bottles of cow blood. Dorian followed Nick into the room and seated himself.

"I know. That's why I had to." She struggled with the cork for a second, then poured it into one of his wine glasses and carried the glass in to him. "When I said no exertion, I meant no exertion . . . of any kind." She turned her back to Dorian and handed Nick the glass of blood. "It's probably the last time you'll ever hear me say anything remotely like this, but . . . drink up."

His fingers wrapped around the stem of the glass mechanically, but he stared up at her, surprised.

"That's right," she said, a wan smile on her lips. "I want you to finish that. And at least another two."

She'd claimed, more times than he wanted to count, that it was the blood that kept him from coming back across. Nick raised the glass to his lips as she sat down beside him—then nearly succeeded in spilling it as Natalie opened his robe and pulled back the left side of his pajama top. Before he could protest, she slapped his shoulder lightly—very lightly—then looked down at the small pucker of skin over his heart, the only outward indication that he'd even been injured.

Natalie touched her fingers to the skin around the wound and pressed carefully, watching his reaction. When he finally winced and looked away, she touched his shoulder and said, "Now let me see the back."

Ignoring Dorian, he slid his arm out of his bathrobe, then unbuttoned the pajama top. She followed much the same procedure with the entrance wound at his back, although her probing didn't cause him any discomfort. Smiling, Natalie helped him back into his pajamas, then his robe. "It looks good, considering last night you had a hole through your chest. Still sore in the front?"

He was rebuttoning the pajama top as she spoke and knew she saw him flinch when he felt his something in his chest tighten again. "Yeah. But I've gotten worse that healed faster."

"You *think* you've had worse," corrected Natalie. She sat down on the couch again, regarding him thoughtfully. "Probably the exposure to garlic. Which is something I should look into. Take it easy. Don't exert yourself. The area around your heart will probably be tender for the next week or so."

Dorian chuckled and they both looked at him. He raised his fist to his lips, in an attempt to hide a smile. "I beg your pardon. But the thought of one of LaCroix's get having a tender heart . . . ."

Nick answered him with a glare, hard words at the tip of his tongue, but Natalie touched his shoulder. Gesturing down at the glass in his hand, she said, "That's what you need, for now. Doctor's orders."

"I'd listen to her, Nick," said Dorian, leaning back in his chair. "She's the reason you're still alive. That we're both still alive." He made a motion with his hand toward Nick. "Dr. Lambert—could you spare a glass? I understand that it's cow, but . . . when in Rome, eh?"

She rose to her feet, looking down at Dorian. Nick caught her hand and her fingers closed around his more tightly than he would have thought mortally possible. "Are you sure you can stand slumming?"

"I fed earlier today. And cow should be an interesting contrast to fresh, human blood." He nodded, adding, "If you please."

Nick felt her hand shake in his, as she stared at Dorian. Only seconds passed, but Natalie looked away first. Slipping her hand from Nick's grasp, she headed for the kitchen without a word or a backward glance. Nick started from the couch, prepared to follow her, but Dorian held up his hand.

"No. I asked her to leave. There are things we have to discuss."

"*I'm* not under your control," countered Nick. But as he moved to put his glass on the coffee table, he felt that tightness in his chest again.

Dorian noticed his hesitation and gestured toward the couch. "Sit down, damn you. She doesn't need your protection—she's stronger without you. And if it wasn't for that outdated chivalric nonsense flowing through your veins, we wouldn't be in this mess." As Nick seated himself, Dorian leaned closer to him, voice low. "I know last night must seem a bit dim; it should grow clearer when you heal. But you must remember Vivian trying to kill you?"

Nick brought the wine glass to his lips, letting the blood pool in his mouth. He looked away from Dorian, at the boarded window. He remembered the sound of the crossbow—that he'd *never* forget. Then, later, Vivian leaning over him, offering her blood, demanding that he take her, that he bring her across . . . .

Letting the glass rest on the arm of the couch, he rubbed his eyes with his fingertips. She'd attacked him, with a stake. And then there'd been the sound of glass breaking and Dorian—

He looked up. Dorian nodded, gesturing toward the window. "Yes. That was the second time. The first time she nearly killed you—that crossbow bolt was meant for me. Or Dr. Lambert." He hesitated, then shrugged. "I'll have the answer soon enough, when Vivian awakens. She won't be able to lie to me anymore." A sad smile crossed his lips. "Should be a bit of a shock to her, I expect, after she's gotten away with it for so long."

It took him a second to understand, but the sudden chill in his chest had less to do with the wound near his heart than with the implications of Dorian's words. "You've brought Vivian across?"

"It's what she wanted." Dorian shrugged. "Dr. Lambert gave you a transfusion from Vivian, so you had the best of her. And I . . . took the rest. She owed us that much, if not more."

Nick saw something other than studied detachment in the Archivist's manner—an unease that he'd never sensed before. "Do you have any idea what you've—?"

"More than you suspect," answered Dorian sharply, sitting upright in the chair. He looked toward the kitchen,

then back to Nick again, as if realizing that he'd been overheard. "But it had to be done. There are too many questions that need to be answered. Too many questions that only Vivian *can* answer. And I can only do a proper interview with her if she's a vampire."

"But she's just been brought across. You can't interview—" Nick stopped and raised his glass to his lips, finding himself fixed by Dorian's cold gaze. After sipping from the glass, he swallowed. "That's right. You're in charge of the interviews. You make your own rules."

"Just so."

"Like—this?" Nick waved at his loft. "Last night I refused to stand for the interview and you accepted my answer. But here we are, again."

"Circumstances intervened. There's precedent for starting from square one. The first time I ran into the problem, we were in a city under siege. The walls gave in the middle of the interview." Dorian closed his eyes and leaned back in the chair again. "What a muddle that turned into—fire everywhere and the Enforcers running riot." He shook his head, then opened his eyes, smiling faintly. "Compared to that, last night was an evening stroll."

"I'm sorry I didn't upset your plans."

"You've done nothing *but* upset my plans. I set this up expecting to find LaCroix's shadow. And instead there's . . . you." Dorian looked away, frowning in annoyance. "Before Dr. Lambert arrived last night, I'd almost resigned myself to the fact that you were going to destroy me—"

Nick started, nearly spilling the blood in his glass. "What?"

"—Which would have meant the Enforcers would win. One way or another, they'd have found a new Archivist. Vivian would have been brought across—although I think they'd realize she was too dangerous to let loose and dispatch her fairly quickly." Dorian wiped his hand across his lips, still frowning. "To think I was looking for a way to leave this mess with honor. *Honor?* What honor would it have been, to let them run loose again? I'm the Archives, dammit. I'm the Code. I'm the History. Lose that and we lose any hope of sanity, or survival." Then Dorian looked at him. "We've both been pawns in this, Nick. I'll find out to what extent once I've interviewed Vivian. But, for now, I have to finish this. I have to interview you. Or my position as Archivist is forfeit."

There was such desperation in Dorian's voice . . . Nick was stunned. He sipped at the glass of blood again, trying to piece together what Dorian had just told him.

Vivian had lied. Everything Vivian had said was a lie. Had she tricked him into working for the Enforcers, as Dorian had asserted last night? Janette had said the Enforcers were looking for a way to rid themselves of Dorian. Vivian was working for the Enforcers. She'd used him against Dorian.

They'd used him against Dorian. Which was why she—not Dorian—had chosen the abattoir, how she knew what Alyce had said, why she'd brought him to the loft, where he'd destroyed LaCroix. The Enforcers had told her. The Enforcers knew that he'd destroyed LaCroix. And if they knew, whether Dorian passed along the information no longer mattered. He was already condemned.

Nick had no great love for Dorian. There was still revenge to be considered. It was the only thing he had left, if he was already condemned, waiting only for the Enforcers to appear and carry out the mandatory sentence. Janette, Carlotta, LaCroix . . . all to be avenged. When Dorian fell, the debt would be settled.

But . . . what purpose would that serve?

He killed the thought quickly, his hatred of Dorian older than his compassion or sense of justice. "Are you asking me to submit to the interview?"

"I'm asking for your cooperation."

Nick finished off the blood and only just stopped himself from tossing the glass into the fireplace. Deliberately, he leaned forward and placed it on the table. "As if I have any choice?"

Dorian stared at him in wonderment. "You've never let that go, have you? Any of it?" Touching his finger to his lips, he leaned on the arm of the chair, eyes wide. "Can such hatred exist, for so long?"

"Yes."

"Nick, it's going to destroy you." Eyes narrowing, Dorian still stared at him. "You'll never cross back, until you let that part of you go."

Nick started, his position suddenly defensive—Dorian knew that he wanted to be mortal again. But . . . how?

When Dorian looked toward the kitchen, he had his answer—Natalie. Anything Dorian needed to know, he could get from his hold over Natalie. She wouldn't have given his secrets away willingly. And how many of her own hopes and dreams had Dorian plundered, to get the information he wanted?

He had vague memories of last night, of thinking Natalie was dead and that the loss of her life was the worst of Dorian's crimes. Could the loss of her will be any less a crime—the subjugation of her spirit, given freely to save him, as Dorian had told him in the abattoir?

If his hatred had burned quietly, banked with the coals of history and memory, it flared red now, flaming hot and bright. "And if I refuse—again?"

Nick expected anger, confrontation, even . . . desperation. Dorian surprised him by looking away, his expression one of sorrow. "It's your right. But we both know you're in no physical condition to resist me. I knew you were stubborn—*that* hasn't changed. And it's why I took the steps I did." He met Nick's gaze. "I hold the one thing you won't risk."

"Natalie."

Her name caught in his throat—he wasn't even aware he'd said it aloud, until Dorian nodded, ever so slowly. "Yes."

Nick looked down, intertwining his fingers. The hunger for revenge had blinded him to reality. Perhaps he and Vivian had been pawns of the Enforcers, but Dorian worked the same way, used the same means to his ends. "When will you let her go?"

"Assuming I will?" Nick looked up sharply, almost rising from his chair at the implied threat, but Dorian held up his hand. "I'll release her . . . when I'm ready. I've given her my word. And whatever else you may think of me, you know I'll keep my word to her."

He stared down at his hands again, then realized that Natalie was standing to one side of the couch, a glass of blood in each hand. Wordlessly, she handed a full glass to Dorian, then offered another to him. Nick reached up to take the glass from her and managed a wan smile, which she echoed. Natalie didn't relinquish the glass to him right away and his fingers caressed hers for a moment, before her hand slipped away and he held the stem of the glass.

"Thank you," said Dorian, giving Natalie a nod. "And my apologies—I'd no intention of keeping you away for so long. But he's as obstinate as he's always been."

"It's part of his charm," answered Natalie, chin raised defiantly, as she seated herself on the arm of the couch, beside Nick. "That . . . and bending steel with his bare hands."

Nick met her eyes, matched her smile. Dorian might have some control over her will, but he hadn't destroyed her spirit. "It's a party trick," he said, when Dorian lifted an eyebrow. "You should try it sometime."

"Perhaps I will." Dorian glanced from him to Natalie and back again, frowning. "Nick—I need your answer before we get formal. Will you cooperate with me on the interview?"

"Yes." He looked up at Natalie. "But . . . I want Natalie to be here."

"Absolutely not. It's not permitted."

One arm resting along the back of the couch, Nick leaned against the cushions, smiling, and raised his glass to Dorian. "Then . . . I refuse."

"No." He looked up with surprise as Natalie touched his shoulder, but her eyes were on Dorian. "No, it's all right," she said quickly. "I'll leave. I'm late back from dinner as it is. Three days and my reputation's shot to hell. I don't want to know what you guys could do with a week."

Dorian leaned forward, as if he were going to say something, but Nick cut him off. He took Natalie's hand. "You've always wanted to know everything," he said softly. "Now's your chance. I *want* you to know. But if *he's* making you go—"

She squeezed his hand and shook her head slightly. "No. It's my choice." And when he stared, unable to hide his fear that she might no longer care, no longer be interested, Natalie added, "I *still* want to know . . . everything. But not this way. Not when you're forced to tell. I want you to tell me in your own time. In your own way."

"But—"

There was something in her eyes that stopped him, a look that had nothing to do with Dorian or being under the control of another. Natalie had made up her mind—and nothing he could say was going to change it. "I'm an outsider, aren't I? It's going to be tough enough for you, without me here. And . . . there's always later."

Her words made sense. Nick stared across the room at the fireplace, past Dorian and this place and time, into memory. There were deeds he'd have to admit . . . he wasn't certain he could find the words. To have Natalie here would be a comfort, but he was still afraid. There was so much he hadn't told her. To hear it a little at a time, within context, with explanation would be difficult enough. But to hear it *all*, now?

When Nick looked back at her, he felt his heart in his throat. There might not be a later. There might not be a tomorrow, if the Enforcers knew he'd destroyed LaCroix. Once they discovered that their plan to remove Dorian had failed, how long before they'd come after him? How much *later* did he have, would he have, to tell her all the things he wanted to say?

"Yes," he answered. "Later."

Natalie kissed him lightly on the forehead. "I'll call tomorrow, see how you're doing." Then she stood and faced Dorian.

Dorian rose to his feet, nodding. "Dr. Lambert."

Their eyes met for a moment and when Natalie turned away, Nick saw a shiver run through her. She picked up her purse on the way to the elevator door, then was gone, without a backward glance.

But he stared at the door, long after it had closed, long after Dorian had seated himself. "There's so much I want her to know," he whispered.

"For now, it's enough that you made the offer." When he looked at Dorian, the Archivist smiled. "As she said, there's always later. In time."

Nick met that cold, dark gaze. "How much time will I have?"

"That depends, I should think, on what you have to tell me. And whether, together, we can outwit the Enforcers." Dorian's smile faded. "I call for the interview of Nicholas. In the past, Nicholas of Brabant. In the present, Nicholas Knight." He paused, raising his glass of blood toward Nick. "How say you? Will you stand?"

Nick stared down at the glass in his hand, at the blood. So much blood—eight centuries of it. Closing his eyes, he answered, "Yes." Then he took a long swallow from the glass.

It wasn't human, but the memory of that taste still lingered on his lips. Opening his eyes, he met Dorian's gaze. "All right. Where do you want to start?"

"Where everything starts—for you."

It wasn't a question. Nick stared at the glass of blood in his hand, letting his mind sift back through the memories, as he spoke the one name they both expected—

"LaCroix."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

TO SAY THAT she was furious would have been an understatement worthy of a vampire. Natalie fumed, pacing inside the elevator to Nick's loft. Not even the fact that he hadn't changed the keycode number was going to save him.

She'd told Nick to call in sick Friday night. So, comes the middle of her double shift on Saturday afternoon—taking off for two days after leaving the office on Dorian's arm had done almost as much damage to her schedule as it had her reputation—and she finds out that Nick *worked* Friday night Not only that, but his entire contact with her since she'd left him alone with Dorian on Thursday night had been two phone messages—the first was that he'd survived and the second, not more than an hour ago, had asked her to drop by the loft on her way home.

Natalie was going to kill him. And when he got back up, she was going to kill him again.

Muttering imprecations against stone-headed vampires, Natalie glared at the elevator doors. Anger was only the half of it, but it was always the easier half to express. She was worried about the fact that he hadn't called—Nick *must* know she was dying to find out how the interview had gone—and that he wasn't healthy enough to be at work—which was a tough enough job even if you weren't a vampire who'd recently had a near-miss with a sharp stake—and . . . that enough had changed between them that he didn't think she *needed* to know about the interview or *cared* about whether he'd gone to work.

The anger was *definitely* easier to deal with. And Natalie was comfortable with that approach, ready to deliver a sermon on responsibility with such fire and brimstone that she'd scorch every little blond hair on his head.

But when the elevator opened and she walked into the loft, she found Nick seated on the couch. He was wearing his bathrobe—which wasn't a good sign, as the sun had set nearly an hour ago—and had tossed a blanket across his legs, which were up on the couch. Immediately, her anger was deflated by

the thought that maybe he wasn't as up to speed as she'd assumed.

"You got my message?" he asked.

The smile on his face as he glanced over his shoulder cut back some of the slack she was prepared to give him. "To stop by? Sure." Natalie rested her hands on her shoulder bag and rested the urge to dig her nails into the leather. "I left word on your machine. It's probably buried by the other two dozen messages I've left on the machine—that you haven't answered." She managed to keep the icy tone in her voice, as she walked toward the couch.

Nick hung his head, wearing a sheepish expression. "Yeah. I've been sleeping. I—uh—went in last night."

"So I heard."

"You were right." Sighing, he leaned his head back against the couch. "I should've stayed home. Barely made it through shift as it was—I was dead on my feet. And by the time I got back here—" he gestured toward the stairs, shrugging.

Natalie sat on the arm of the chair, across from him, absently pushing her bag to the seat as the strap slipped from her shoulder. "How do you feel now?" she asked, searching his expression for some signs of the weariness he claimed had overcome him. "Any pain?"

In answer, Nick stretched his arms over his head, then—too quickly—dropped them back to his lap. "No. A little sore, in spots. Not half-bad, really. Just as well I was scheduled for the day off."

He'd been in too much of a hurry coming out of that stretch. Natalie pursed her lips and eyed him thoughtfully. "Maybe I'd better take another look—"

His eyes were suddenly filled with something very much like panic. "Wait—I, uh, I've got something. For you." Sitting up, he reached over the back of the couch without showing any strain at all in his back or arms. He fished up a package wrapped in a brightly patterned paper and topped with a bow.

Natalie stared at the flower pattern of the paper as he held the box out to her. "Go ahead, take it," he pressed.

Her fingers closed on the end of the box. When he released it, it tipped toward him and she had to grapple with it to keep it from falling to the floor. It wasn't all that heavy, she just hadn't gotten a grip on it. "What's this?"

His grin was maddening—he looked just like a child with a secret. "Open it and find out."

Sliding down from the arm onto the cushion of the chair, Natalie placed the box in her lap. She looked up at him suspiciously, but there was no clue in his expression—other than the fact that he was inordinately pleased with himself. And she couldn't help but tease him, just a little. "Maybe I should take it with me." But when he opened his mouth to protest, the panic returning, her resolve fell away. "Oh, all right," she muttered, tearing into the paper.

It turned out to be a box from an exclusive designer. The dress inside was similar to the one she'd purchased at Dorian's insistance—not exact, but close enough so that she might imagine them to be the same, her memory not being quite so perfect as a vampire's. She'd never be able to match them for accuracy because she'd cut the other dress into pieces and disposed of it —all she needed was the local garbage men finding a blood-covered dress in her trash. Then again, she *was* a coroner. And there hadn't been any question about the blood-spattered sneakers she'd disposed of last week.

She held up the dress with the tips of her fingers, making a mental note not to let anything happen to this one. It looked even *more* expensive.

"Your other dress—" Nick paused, when she looked up at him. "The blood's tough to get out."

"I've had some experience with it," said Natalie, her eyes returning to the dress. "Though you've been at it longer—if anyone would know, I guess you'd be an expert." But the more she looked at it, the more she realized just how much it might have cost. There was no size label inside the neck, no laundering instructions—this was *not* off the rack.

Reluctantly, she let the dress fall back into the box. "Nick, I can't accept this."

"You can," he answered firmly, pushing the box toward her, when she tried to hand it back. "And *will*."

Before she could protest further, he drew his arm back quickly, wincing. Natalie rose to her feet, only catching the box and the dress as a second thought. "I *saw* that."

"It's nothing." But he spoke through gritted teeth and leaned back against the couch, waving her off. "Just . . . keep it, okay? I can't take it back, they don't do returns. I'd appreciate it if you'd try it on, tell me if I got the size right. They'll do alterations."

Natalie bit on her lip, wondering, for a moment, how much of what she'd seen was an act. He'd had her right up to the bit about alternations. If it wasn't for the fact that he was still recuperating, and was wearing that little-boy-lost-look. "All right," she said, wrapping her arms around the box and holding it to her chest. But when he grinned triumphantly, she shook her finger at him. "Next week we start the white blood cell count series again?"

"Fine."

He'd given in too easily. Suspicious, Natalie watched him for a moment, then gestured toward the staircase. "I'll run up and try it on. Would that make you happy?"

"I'd like to see how it fits."

She mouthed the words 'how it fits' and he added quickly, "Just to make sure they got it right."

"O-kay." Still suspicious, she started toward the staircase, then turned, walking sideways. "You just . . . stay there. You shouldn't be up and down these stairs, anyway. No exertion, remember?"

"Vividly."

Nick sank back down, below the back of the couch, so that she lost sight of him, until she was about half-way up the stairs. His eyes were closed and he'd drawn the blanket up to his chin, as if he were sleeping. And Natalie

"Some," he admitted. "Mostly self-preservation. Janette's always loved to dance and she doesn't often take 'no' for an answer."

"So I've gathered."

Nick raised an eyebrow at her comment, but continued to smile, even as she cursed herself six ways from Sunday for saying something so stupid. Natalie looked over his shoulder. She could hear her own heart beating loudly in her ears—could he hear it, too? If she listened for that special one beat, every ten minutes, would she hear his?

That brought to mind the fact that she'd *seen* his heart beat. And she looked up quickly, catching him off-guard. There was a pallor in his cheeks, despite the extra blood he'd been drinking. "How are you feeling?"

She saw the lie on his lips, saw the confident smile he was ready to pass off as the truth, to allay her fears—then watched both tossed aside. "Tired," he admitted, after a moment's pause.

Something in her own heart leaped at the admission; she found security in knowing that he trusted her enough not to lie to her. "You shouldn't be dancing," she admonished softly, the professional in her needing to get a word in edgewise, between the flowers and the music. "You should be resting."

"But I want to dance." There was something of the willful child in him, as he spoke. Then the childish smile faded away as he stared into her eyes. "I want . . . . "

Natalie barely noticed the music ended. Her heartbeat sounded like a drum in her ears and, though she knew it was medically impossible, she thought it might explode in her chest. Nick spun her around, her back to him, his arms around her. She took one breath, than another, waiting.

He never finished the thought. Releasing her, he took a step back, then headed for the table. "I cheated on the wine," he announced, in a guiltless tone. Picking up the bottle from the ice bucket, he looked down at the label. "Definitely *not* hotel banquet vintage."

Natalie was frozen in place, her right hand still resting on her left shoulder, as he'd left her. He'd looked in her eyes. And seen . . . what?

"I think you'll like it." Having found the corkscrew, Nick was now pouring the wine into a glass for her. "I was there the autumn it was bottled. The vineyards were beautiful."

It was nonsense. He was talking nonsense. What had he seen in her eyes? But she knew, didn't she? Natalie knew *exactly* what he'd seen. "Nick?"

He walked toward her, the glass in his hand. "Don't worry—it's not one of mine—the hotel supplied the glassware . . . although they don't know it, yet. Try it."

Her hand reached for the glass automatically, her eyes fixed on the table, the flowers, anywhere but him. Natalie couldn't look at him. She couldn't meet his eyes. "What happened?"

"Nothing. It was a quiet summer. Well . . . but the war was a continent away."

"Not that." She looked down at the glass in her hand, at the sparkle of the wine in the candlelight. "With Dorian. And the interview."

She dared a look up at him, meeting his eyes. But he turned away quickly, his back to her. "Does it matter?"

"To me? *Yes.*"

For a moment, she wasn't certain what he was going to say or do. Nick looked down at the floor, then glanced at her, over his shoulder. "Don't you know?"

Natalie frowned and brought the glass to her lips, buying herself time. His tone wasn't an accusation, it wasn't bitter or meant to be hurtful—she knew well enough what his voice sounded like when he intended *that*—but was . . . surprised. "No. I don't. What did you tell him?"

"What could I hide from him?" Walking past her, he seated himself on the arm of the couch. "I told him everything. Everything he wanted to know. Everything I've seen and heard and been and done."

"And about—?" When he looked at her, she gestured at the room around them, at the darkness.

But he knew what she meant. His eyes moved from her, staring into memory. "And . . . that, too," he answered, his voice so soft she almost couldn't hear him.

She didn't know the vampire Code. Natalie couldn't guess what Dorian would do with the information Nick had given him—that Nick had destroyed his master, LaCroix. She did know one thing: "He's not on good terms with the Enforcers. He won't turn you in."

"It doesn't matter what Dorian does. He gets what he wants. He *always* gets what he wants. But—" he looked up at her, meeting her eyes again, "you already know that."

Natalie closed her eyes and clasped her other hand around the stem of her glass as she turned away from him. Again, he wasn't *trying* to hurt her . . . but with a little more 'not trying', he could squash her heart like a bug. "I didn't ask for this."

She meant her tone to be level, even, calm; but a quiver in her voice betrayed her. It brought Nick back to her. Standing behind Natalie, he put his arms around her. "I know," he said, speaking softly, beside her ear. "Nat—I'm sorry. I didn't mean—" She shifted in his arms, turning to face him, to meet his eyes. He stared down at her. "I never wanted anything like this to happen to you."

Nick didn't look away, even after what he couldn't help but see in her eyes—her bond to Dorian. He didn't blame *her*.

That stirred something in her heart, gave her hope. "He'll let me go. He promised he would, when this is over. Soon."

"Soon?" Nick sighed and touched his forehead to hers. "Nat—he's not mortal. Within his concept of time, 'soon' could be a day, or a week, or a decade." Before his words could sink in, he added, almost hesitantly, "What's it like?"

She pulled back from him, startled, but he held her

Everything was *perfect*.

Except that he was missing his socks and shoes.

Things started making sense—he'd had the tux on beneath the bathrobe, which was why he'd had the blanket over him on the couch. And why he'd pulled out of that stretch so quickly—he'd forgotten and nearly ended up showing the cuffs of the tux when the sleeves of the robe fell back. This was why he'd been so insistent that she try on the dress. And his socks and shoes—they might have shown beneath his bathrobe if he'd stood up and with everything else he had to do . . . .

"I couldn't take you to the dance, so I brought the dance here," explained Nick. There was a bit of hesitation in his eyes, as he added, "You don't mind, do you?"

Natalie was stunned. She was flabbergasted. She was—damn near close to crying, thank you very much. Clutching the railing tightly as she walked down the stairs, she fought for any sense of composure she could muster. "No, I—uh—don't mind. The bare feet are a real fashion statement."

Nick looked down at his feet—she had a feeling that if he could have blushed, he would have. "You would have seen—there wasn't time—I'll get my shoes."

By that time, she'd reached the bottom of the stairs and caught his hand before he could move away. "First, you'll give me the flowers," instructed Natalie. When he handed them to her, she reached up to kiss him on the cheek, then let them fall easily against her arms—knowing enough to keep them from staining the very expensive dress and watching for thorns . . . because there were *always* thorns. "They're beautiful." She stared down at the bright red roses, then back up at him. "And as far as your fashion choice in footwear—I think I'll join you."

He'd thought enough ahead to have put a vase on the dining table—she gave him big points for that. Natalie walked over and placed the cut flowers into the vase, giving them little more than a tweak and a promise. When she had a moment, she'd handle them properly. But first . . . she leaned on the table and gratefully took off each one of her shoes.

Nick was suddenly beside her, his hand on her elbow, steadying her. "Wrong size?"

She smiled at the disappointment in his voice. "Wrong *style*."

"But," he met her eyes, puzzled, as she tossed the second shoe away and touched his hand on her arm, "I'm certain they were exactly like the ones you had on—"

"Not my choice. Dorian picked them for me."

It was the wrong thing to say—she realized that the second after the words left her lips. Nick was looking in her eyes the moment she said Dorian's name. Something in his gaze darkened and his hand fell from her arm as he turned away.

She moved to the trolley and lifted a lid from one of the dishes, trying to salvage the situation. "You're *not* going to tell me you cooked this yourself?"

"I'm not." Turning back, he smiled and shrugged. "I got a room for the night at the banquet hotel and ordered room service, then picked it up and brought it back here."

"All that work for catered chicken?" Natalie looked down at the tray with renewed interest, then picked up a curliqued sliver of carrot and frowned. "I'm flattered, I think."

"I told you, I brought the whole dance here."

"Except for the speeches," she noted, dropping the carrot to the plate and covering the dish. There were two of everything on the trolley—maybe he'd make an effort to *eat* something.

"I figured you'd handle that. You're good at lectures."

"Thanks, but no thanks." Natalie swatted him lightly on the shoulder, across the table. "We could always get a car to backfire somewhere. What was that—two years ago? Best dance they've had, so I'm told." She wandered away from him, over toward the couch.

"I wasn't there, either," admitted Nick. He stayed by the table, watching her. "On duty. You?"

Natalie ran her fingers along the arm of the couch, then came across a tear in the leather. "I think so. Two years—who remembers?" But, of course, she was only human—how could she remember? Nick probably could recite the duty roster for the night, tell her how many cups of coffee Schanke had downed, as well as how many of the donuts by the water cooler had colored sprinkles. Being a vampire certainly had its disadvantages, sometimes.

There'd been too long a pause. She looked up and saw that he'd pulled back a chair from the table for her. "Hungry?"

Natalie glanced over at the covered dishes on the tray. She'd planned on picking up something for dinner on her way home. A half hour ago she'd been ravenous. But now . . . . "Maybe we could dance, first?"

Her heart beat just a little faster as Nick walked toward her, then bowed. "I'd ask, but—I must be too late. You look so lovely, your dance card must be full."

Natalie pretended to remove a scrap of paper from inside the front of her dress, then deliberately tore it in half and tossed the pieces over her shoulder. "I think I can fit you in."

Taking her hand, he swept her into his arms. She wasn't certain what song was playing, but Natalie was pretty sure she'd remember it for the rest of her mortal days—she'd have to ask him, later. Nick danced like he'd practiced for a thousand years. Well, eight hundred. And for a second, as he drew her close, she thought of him having learned to dance as a young knight, picturing him clanking about in full armor.

She chuckled against his shoulder and he pulled back, smiling down at her. "What?"

"Nothing." Natalie shook her head, not wanting to completely spoil the mood with her strange sense of humor. "I'm . . . not a very good dancer, actually. I suppose you've had a lot of experience."

She felt Nick's hand squeeze her shoulder. Turning his head, he whispered a warning, "Nat—" in her ear.

"No, let her finish." Dorian waved his hand at Nick, as if dismissing him. "Like—what?"

But when those cold eyes fixed on hers, whatever she'd been thinking drowned, a quick and quiet death in the darkness. Only Nick's presence allowed Natalie to hold her chin high, to stare Dorian down.

"I'm *not* going to condemn him," said Dorian, after a moment's pause, his tone defensive. "I couldn't if I tried. I could only condemn Nick if he'd broken the Code . . . and he *hasn't*. Oh, there are some minor infractions here and there—you among them—but nothing to warrant a condemnation. And you, Dr. Lambert, are exempt because you're bound to me and *I'm* exempt from those sections of the Code."

"Are you saying I was justified in destroying LaCroix?" asked Nick, wonder in his voice. "That the Enforcers don't *care*, that they won't come after me?"

Natalie looked up at Nick, startled at the relief in his words. Had he thought he was doomed—well, more doomed than usual, which was a pretty heavy consideration for someone like Nick, who wore his guilt like shackles—whether or not Dorian turned him over to the Enforcers?

She looked over at Dorian, who'd sighed loudly, then shook his head, like a teacher dealing with a particularly slow, but promising, pupil. "I'm saying that I can only condemn you for what's true, not what you *believe* to be true." He looked away. "If the latter were the case, the Enforcers would've hunted you down long ago, for daring to believe that you could ever be mortal. But only deeds count, Nick, not thoughts." Dorian glanced at her, then met Nick's eyes again. "Look, I respect your beliefs, what you're attempting to do. I may not agree with them, but—" he shrugged "—that's not for me to judge. If, somehow, you *do* go back across . . . let me know. It's something that should be recorded."

Nick glanced down at Natalie, hesitation in him. She let her eyes go wide and shook her head—she'd no idea what to tell him.

"If only for the ones like you that might come after?" asked Dorian. "Though the gods help the Code, if we're forced to deal with the likes of you again."

There was such an earnest note in Dorian's voice that Natalie had to smile. Nick nodded, adding, "All right. If you put it that way—"

"Good. You'll also be pleased to know I'm leaving Toronto, tonight."

"With Vivian?" asked Nick.

Natalie froze—she'd assumed Vivian was dead. There was something in Dorian's manner that became very uncertain the moment Nick mentioned Vivian's name. He touched his finger to his lips, then looked away, saying, "She'll continue to reside here, for a time."

Nick's hand slipped from Natalie's shoulder as he took a step toward Dorian. "You can't leave her. Not after bringing her across—?"

Her heart stopped. At least, that's what the cold chill in her chest felt like. Natalie looked from Nick to Dorian and back again. What *had* she missed, when Dorian had sent her out of the room? "You brought her across?" she asked Dorian, knowing what he'd said, knowing how he felt about such things.

Turning away, he threw his hands into the air. "I had no choice. She lies too well. The only way I could know she wasn't lying, the only way I could *force* her to answer my questions, was to make her one of us. Thankfully, she's a vain creature. I wasn't forced to go too far beyond threats to get my answers." He glanced at Natalie, over his shoulder. The cold, dispassionate tone was belied by a wounded look in his eyes. "It wasn't an easy decision for me to make—and one I'll always regret. But I had to know the truth about her ties with the Enforcers and . . . others."

His emphasis on the last word only deepened the chill that stole through Natalie. "And . . . now you know?"

"Yes." He met her eyes, his lips set in a grim line. "But I have to uphold the Code, about information given during an interview. And I—I swore an oath, besides. I can't say more about it."

"Then let *me* talk to her," offered Nick. "I've got some questions of my own, about how she knew what happened at the abattoir, and here. I have to know what the Enforcers told—"

"The Enforcers told her *nothing*. She had . . . another source. And as for speaking with her—" Dorian wouldn't raise his eyes, his tone reluctant, almost fearful. "No. It's not possible."

There was such finality in his voice, Natalie felt her heart in her throat, almost believing—"You've destroyed her?"

That got her his attention. "Destroy *Vivian?*" A look of devastation flashed across Dorian's face, quickly replaced by a neutral mask. "No. But she had a lesson to learn, as did the Enforcers. I'll return in a decade or so and dig her out again."

"You buried her."

It didn't seem like that chill was going to leave her anytime soon—now Nick was a contributing factor, his accusation flat and final and . . . almost frightened.

"Deep," answered Dorian, his face still neutral. But his eyes were gold and red and black. "In concrete and steel. You're safe from her. Both of you."

"Ten years, without blood? Buried? Dorian—she'll go mad."

The red took over Dorian's eyes, as he turned away. And he couldn't keep his voice quite so neutral. "Yes. Yes, she will. Then I'll turn her over to the Enforcers and let *them* deal with her. They made her, they can unmake her. And it's better than she might have done, after playing such games. Far better." He took a step away from them, walking to the arm of the couch.

Dorian looked down, his hand brushing the leather, as if it were human skin. "She never understood, really.

in his arms. "What?"

"Being bonded. What's it like?"

"You've never—?"

Letting his arms fall from her, Nick stepped back. "No. Never needed to. I never wanted that much control, that much responsibility. But I know the theory." He rubbed the side of his face with the palm of his hand, staring past her. "You're connected. You can sense him, sense things about him. You're . . . close to him. Almost as close as being brought across, but not . . . quite."

He looked back to her, as if asking for confirmation of his supposition. Natalie squared her shoulders, forcing herself to deal with the whole thing in a clinical manner. What *was* it like?

"Yes," she admitted, after a pause. "Something like that. It ranges from just knowing he's there, to him having complete control over everything I do or say. All day I've felt him . . . checking on me."

"The night of the interview, when you left—?"

"That was me, *my* decision," she answered quickly.

"Are you that sure?" When she didn't answer, he nodded, accepting her silence, and walked away a few steps, as far as the stereo unit. "What can you sense about him now?"

Natalie didn't want to sense *anything* about Dorian—she wanted no contact with him. But when Nick looked over his shoulder at her, the question in his gaze, she steeled herself. Closing her eyes, Natalie pressed the cool glass of wine to her cheek and let her mind touch that something *other* that had invaded her thoughts, her inner world. "He's getting ready to leave Toronto. Everything's in order, he just has a few things to take care of and then . . . he'll be gone. I-I don't know where."

And, as she stood there, knowing these things with a terrible certitude she had no earthy reason to have, Natalie shivered. Because the thought occurred to her that Dorian might want to take her with him, now that Vivian was gone and he had no one to care for him. She wasn't certain it would matter to him whether she went willingly or not—his control over her would ensure that she'd do exactly what he said; she'd leave her life, her job, her friends—and Nick—behind, in less than a heartbeat.

Her eyes shot open and she started, as Nick touched her arm and then took her hand in his. "I won't let him take you away," he promised.

Gold flickered in the depths of his blue eyes. And though her heart warmed at his words, she frowned in answer, shaking her head lightly. "No. I won't let this turn into another fight."

"Now . . . no. I'm not in any shape to fight a mortal, never mind a vampire as old as Dorian. And if I hurt him badly enough while you were bonded—" Nick's eyes blazed gold for an instant. "It could kill *you*."

That clear, cold sound she'd heard earlier, that she'd been hearing at intervals throughout the day, shot through her. Natalie looked away from Nick, not wanting to see the gold, not wanting to hear any more. "He's here," she announced, forcing calm into her voice.

Nick looked up, toward the elevator, then back down at her. Smiling, he turned and walked over to the stereo. He touched the 'play' button, then returned to her, bowing slightly as the music began to flow from the speakers again. "May I have this dance?"

"But—?" Natalie glanced over her shoulder, toward the elevator—she could hear it in motion. Dorian was *here*. Dorian was coming to get her.

Then she turned back to Nick, met his eyes—and found some calm in his steady gaze. Leaning down, she placed her wine glass on the coffee table, which he'd pushed against the fireplace, beside the couch. Then she moved into his arms and rested her head against his shoulder.

Distantly, Natalie heard the elevator arrive and the door open. Something within her knew that Dorian was there, Dorian was watching her. But as she felt Nick's hand tighten over her own, Dorian's hold over her grew weaker. Raising her head, she looked up at Nick, meeting his eyes. She thought of him, only of him—of his smile, of his laugh, of his bad jokes and his bad moods, of the way he babied that silly car, of the way he danced, of his desperation to be something other than what he was, to be true to that inner self that had somehow survived all those centuries of LaCroix's tutelage. Natalie found strength in that, she found strength in *him*. And so, when Dorian spoke, his words washed over her without effect.

"I'm glad to see that you've fully recovered."

He never shifted his eyes from her, their gazes were locked. When Nick tilted his chin toward Dorian, checking with her, making certain she was ready, Natalie nodded—she could face Dorian, now. Nick released her hand and she turned, but his arm fell over her shoulder. And this time, she didn't mind the proprietary gesture.

Dorian stood with his back against the wall beside the elevators, arms folded across his chest. He was wearing a black suit, something more expensive than the one he'd purchased in the mall the other evening.

"Dorian." Nick inclined his head in greeting. Natalie remained quiet, meeting the Archivist's curious gaze with a frank stare.

He broke eye contact first, wandering over to the dining table. An eyebrow raised, he looked back at them questioningly, then realization dawned and he snapped his fingers. "Ah—the dance tonight! I've spoiled your plans. My apologies—that was never my intention." He walked toward them. "You look lovely, Dr. Lambert. And . . . *very* dapper, Nick. But this isn't entirely a social call—I came to thank you for standing for the interview." Dorian's eyes narrowed, as he stood before Nick. "You're a very interesting vampire. Almost . . . unique."

"Should I take that as a compliment?"

"Take it any way you like," retorted Dorian. He turned his gaze to Natalie. "Is he this combative with everyone?"

"How's he supposed to be, when you act like—"

Dorian's lips moved, but Natalie didn't hear any words because he spoke so softly. Nick, on the other hand, seemed to hear plenty. His eyes widened in surprise, then he looked down and away. By the time she looked back to Dorian, he'd stopped speaking. And his lips were drawn into a grim line.

"I—I didn't need to know that," said Nick, after a second's hesitation. He stared at Dorian and Natalie couldn't quite read the expression on his face. "If the Enforcers knew you'd—that part of the Code—?"

"They wouldn't need to find an excuse to get rid of me?" Dorian's grim expression became a smile. "We two are the only ones who know. You have my life in your hands, in your memory, Nicholas. It pays any debt I may owe you and yours. Do with it what you will."

As Dorian turned and stalked to the elevator, Natalie went over to Nick, touching his arm. He hadn't moved since Dorian had spoken his secret. And he stared at Dorian's back, his expression . . . she *still* wasn't certain.

The elevator door opened and Dorian moved to step inside, but paused on the threshold, one hand holding the door. "We're not friends, you and I, nor were we ever meant to be. But we share a common enemy. Take warning, Nick—watch your back," his gaze moved to Natalie, "and everything you hold dear."

Stepping inside, he released the door and it closed behind him. Natalie stared at it a moment longer, suddenly realizing what Dorian had done—he'd given Nick some information, some crime from his past, that the Enforcers could use to destroy him. Dorian had put his life in Nick's hands. But . . . did he really know how much Nick hated him?

Suddenly fearful, she looked at Nick. He, too, was staring at the elevator door, as if considering Dorian's parting words—some sort of warning? But then his shook his head, his mouth set in a grim line, as he muttered, "No. He's wrong. He *must* be wrong."

"Will you turn him over to the Enforcers?" she asked. "Tell them his secret?"

"Hmn?" He met her eyes. "What? Oh—what Dorian said about—?" Nick's gaze locked on the closed elevator door again, not finishing the thought, almost as if he didn't dare speak Dorian's secret aloud. "No. He's—he's our history, for what it's worth. And he's right—we *were* different people then. I can't forgive what he's done to—" He turned around, his back to her. "I *can't* forgive. But I can't turn him in, either. He's better than that, now." Nick's shoulders straightened, as if the decision had lifted some burden from him. Then, he glanced at her over his shoulder. "So, just how old *is* he?"

Natalie smiled. "Oh, like I'm gonna tell *you*."

"Why?" Nick mirrored her smile, but there was something sharp in it that made her back up a step. "I can keep a secret."

"Yes, but it's not your secret. It's between Dorian and me." She closed her eyes and looked past him, still feeling that sense of loss. Then she let her eyes focus on Nick. And, for a brief second, she wondered what it would be like to share that bond with him . . . .

Natalie shook her head, driving that thought away quickly. Giving up her will wasn't worth it. And she wasn't certain she trusted Nick to care for her as diligently as Dorian. He could be very forgetful at times.

But Nick was still watching her, eyes cautious. She smiled, knowing she still had one secret she could share. "I *can* tell you one thing—the question I asked Dorian, the one he wouldn't answer? I asked him if anyone's ever come back across."

"And he said . . . yes?" He stared at her, waiting for her to contradict him. When she didn't, he ran to her, placed his hands on her waist, picked her up and whirled her around. "Yes! Nat, it's *possible*. He wouldn't lie. Dorian doesn't lie. Which means it's *possible!*"

She shrieked when he lifted her in the air, then hung on for dear life as Nick swung her around and hugged her. But his arms were only around her for a second before he released her, heading for the elevator door. "He might know how it happened. We have to get him, Dorian has to tell us—"

Natalie barely managed to catch his arm. She couldn't have held him if he'd wanted to get away, but Nick still had half an eye on her—he stopped, cold. "He won't tell you," she said slowly. "He can't. As it is, he's broken his word by telling us that much—that it's possible."

"Telling *you* that much," corrected Nick, glancing at the elevator door as if doubting that Dorian was really gone.

"He owed me."

"Ummmm. So I gather." That doubting look was in his eyes, but it vanished almost as quickly as it had appeared. "I guess we've got a lot to talk about."

There it was—in his eyes, in his words. Things weren't back to 'normal' between them, or even as 'normal' as they'd been before Dorian's arrival. Nick was admitting, *finally* admitting, that they owed one another some explanations. Natalie felt a sense of relief flood through her, despite the knot in her stomach at the memory of the hard words that would have to be recalled, dissected, and dismissed. But they *were* going to get through this. Together.

"We can talk, later," she told him, taking his hand in her own. "About what happened between you and Dorian. About what happened between Dorian and me. About what happened between *us*." Nick flinched at the last comment, but she raised his hand to her cheek, holding it there. "But right now—I think you still owe me a dance?"

"I owe you . . . a lot more." Nick dropped his hand to her shoulder and placed his other arm around her. She stared into his eyes, without fear, without hesitation.

But as he leaned down to kiss her, she remembered Dorian's warnings, his object lessons. Natalie turned her face away, so that Nick's lips brushed her cheek. When he raised his head, meeting her eyes with the question as to

She thought knowledge was power. She wanted to be Archivist. I could have forgiven her that. But she knew the Enforcers would try to control her if they brought her across. When I wouldn't help her, she made a deal with the devil himself. And what *he* could have done with that knowledge, that power . . . ." His fingers formed a fist, which he clutched to his chest. Then he turned, looking at Nick. "I'm afraid she realized too late what she'd done—which was why she made a play for you. You were a poor fourth on her list. You were her last hope." Dorian shrugged and rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth, still staring at Nick. "That concludes our business, I think."

"Not . . . quite," managed Natalie.

Dorian hesitated, his eyes still locked with Nick's. Then he looked at her, as if acknowledging her presence for the first time, and smiled. "Oh, yes. The bond." He walked over to her, his eyes never leaving hers. "I promised to remove it, didn't I?"

"You *did*," said Nick, talking a step toward the Archivist.

Dorian looked at Nick and said sharply, "You've no part in this."

Natalie closed her eyes and groaned inwardly—*just* what she needed, two grown men, vampires even, acting like high school jocks. Or jerks. Walking over to Dorian, she tapped him on the shoulder. "You've lied once," she whispered. "*Don't* make it a habit."

He flinched, his eyes still on Nick, his voice distant. "I'd almost forgotten about that." Dorian turned, facing her. "Brave, Dr. Lambert—but bravery and foolishness have a thin border between them; it's too easy to cross, unknowing, in the dark. You'd do well to remember that, when dealing with our kind."

"Oh, *I'll* remember," promised Natalie.

He raised a hand to her cheek and she pulled back from his touch. Dorian stared into her eyes, and she found that sadness still there—from his having to deal with Vivian, no doubt. But then, she realized he was mourning *her*, his loss of her.

Dorian nodded, barely moving his head, acknowledging her thought. "Just as I'll remember you, Mouse-Mouse." He leaned forward, kissing her on the lips.

Natalie felt a compulsion to kiss him, Dorian was forcing her to respond in kind. But that was only at first. As his lips pulled away from hers, she felt something else draw back, felt that presence in her mind shrivel and blow away. It left an emptiness behind, a loneliness she hadn't realized was there, before the presence had arrived.

She stood quietly for a second, saddened by this unexpected loss, staring into his eyes. And then, before he could move, she raised her hand and slapped him across the face.

Nick let out a strangled laugh and turned his face away. Dorian seemed stunned for a second, then raised his hand to his cheek. The red mark would fade in a few seconds, she was certain of that, or as certain as she could be with what she knew of vampire physiology. Even though the palm of her hand burned, Natalie refused to give him the satisfaction of knowing just how much effort she'd put into that shot.

But his frown, as Dorian held his cheek, turned into a gentle smile. "I probably deserved that. And I owe you better. I owe you my life—when *he* would have killed me, in the abattoir."

Natalie looked over at Nick, who was still trying to hide a smile. "I didn't want him to make a mistake," she said evenly. "That was all."

"Forgive me, then, if I prefer to believe that you didn't want to see me die." He paused. "Perhaps I can repay part of my debt to you—you asked me a question, the same question, twice. Once before the gas, once before the stake in the car . . . do you remember? I said I couldn't answer you?"

Natalie glanced over at Nick, who seemed puzzled. Of course, he didn't know about the gas attack at the rental or the booby-trapped stake in the car. They'd have a *lot* to talk about . . . later.

But then she found herself meeting Dorian's eyes. Natalie knew instantly what he was saying, what he was offering—she'd asked him if anyone had ever come back across, had turned back from being a vampire to being mortal again. "I remember."

"The answer is . . . yes. With certitude." Hurriedly, he placed a finger to her lips, stopping her next question. "That's all I can give you on that topic—no more than that. What you do with it is up to you."

Again, she glanced at Nick. He'd stepped closer, an eyebrow raised. Oh, yes, they'd have an awful lot to talk about later.

"One more thing, one more gift for you," said Dorian, and she turned her attention back to him. "I owe you my life, more than once. For that, you should know the time you've saved." Before she could move, he leaned forward, whispering a number in her ear.

Natalie started, staring at him as he drew away. She wasn't certain what to say, how to react.

For his part, Dorian seemed pleased at her reaction. He took her hand in his, fingers closing around hers, that sadness in his eyes again. "Now, you know. And I know. When you die and become dust, only *I* will know again. That's my gift to your splendid mortality, Dr. Lambert. Guard my secret." He raised her hand to his lips and turned, as if to leave.

But then his gaze fell on Nick. Dorian looked back at her, then to Nick again, as if making a decision. "As long as I'm sharing secrets—" He closed his eyes, rubbing the back of his hand across his face before opening them again. "I can't erase the things I've done. Nor do I want to. I was—*we* were—different people then, Nick. Our pasts are part of us— we can't deny them, but we can't let them control us, either. You think I owe you something. Fine. I'll pay in kind."

began to reconsider her assumption that the sudden pain he'd exhibited was an act to make her take the gift he'd plainly put some effort into finding for her.

Feeling like the ultimate ingrate, she walked into the bathroom. Natalie placed the dress box on the edge of the sink, then looked into the mirror.

This was wrong. After all that had happened, all that they'd said to one another . . . they'd fallen right back to where they'd been before Dorian had arrived. She was relieved that they weren't repeating that last scene in the lab—God, that had been *awful*—but there had to be some acknowledgment of what had happened. And what was going to happen.

Because she *wasn't* free. She was bound to Dorian. And however much Nick pretended it wasn't there, she felt something come between them, like a shadow, every time her eyes met his.

Still, they were talking, at least. And he *was* recovering from the stake wound . . . .

Natalie reached into the box, then nearly dropped it for the second time when she felt something pass through her; it was like a note of music, a single, solitary sound. Placing her hands over her ears, she closed her eyes and held her breath, inwardly screaming for it to go away.

Dorian was looking for her. Just as Nick hadn't answered *her* calls, she'd ignored the messages Dorian kept leaving with Grace, having tossed the dozen roses in the medical waste disposal, along with every piece of paper or phone message that followed with his name on it. She'd spent most of last night's shift dreading his return; that Dorian would show up at the office.

Thankfully, he'd kept his distance. But he kept checking on her. Concentrating, she focused on one thought, repeating the words over and over to herself—go away, go away, go *away!* Not now. She couldn't deal with this now. She had to sort things out with Nick, first. Then . . . she'd deal with it later.

After a minute, it stopped. Shaking, she sat down on the toilet seat cover, her hand gripping the edge of the sink. Natalie rested her head on her arm, thankful that she'd been away from Nick when this had happened. She didn't know how he'd react—wasn't at all certain how *she'd* react—if Dorian tried to contact her while Nick was around. Would he know? Could she hide it?

But . . . Nick was waiting. And the longer she hid in the bathroom, the more questions she'd have to answer, later.

With a sigh, Natalie opened the box and removed the dress. As it unfolded to its full length, a pair of shoes fell out, having been tucked inside—that's why she'd fumbled with the box, when Nick had handed it to her. Natalie frowned as she bent down to retrieve the shoes. They were almost exactly the same pair that Dorian had talked her into buying—very chic, very sharp, and *very* uncomfortable.

Clutching the shoes to her chest, she sat back on the toilet seat cover and laughed. Was it vampires, men in general, or male vampires in particular who didn't have a clue about comfortable shoes? Then, as she thought for a moment, she decided that the problem had probably never arisen—vampires had such a high tolerance for pain that they probably never noticed if their shoes pinched. It occurred to her that there were a lot of day-to-day things about being a vampire that she just didn't know, and which might be important in the long run, especially if she ever managed to bring Nick back across. Nick having to deal with his first blister after eight hundred years was *not* something she was prepared to handle . . . yet.

Natalie unzipped the back of her dress, then pulled it over her head. Giving it a quick shake, she hung it on a hook on the back of the bathroom door, then picked up the green dress that she'd left lying on the box, on the edge of the sink. She slipped it over her head, zipped up the back, then adjusted it, as she checked herself in the mirror.

Not great but . . . good. *Definitely* good. Of course, she'd need a full length mirror to do a full check, but Nick wouldn't care. He just wanted to make certain the dress fit. The fact that he'd gotten her measurements down to the quarter inch might have caused her some consternation—if she was prepared to give it any thought. But Natalie undid the clip that held her hair back and, pulling her fingers through a knot, tried to give the dress all it was worth . . . which, judging from the box cover, was quite a bit.

The last step were the shoes. Wincing, she slipped her foot into the left shoe, then shifted her weight and tried the right. They fit—just. But she'd been on her feet all day and they were swollen and—

There was no getting around it. Male vampires did *not* have a clue about comfortable shoes.

Resigned to that fact, and planning on darting out, taking Nick's accolades, then slipping back into her work clothes and out the front door before Dorian tried to contact her again, Natalie smoothed down the dress with the flat of her hand and took a deep breath. Very calmly, she opened the door and walked out onto the upper landing, heading for the staircase. "Okay, sleepyhead, are you happ—"

The words froze on her lips. She'd taken her time—yeah—but she didn't think she'd been gone *that* long. Because a lot in the loft had changed during her absence.

There was music playing—soft, ballroom stuff—and the couch and chair had been pushed aside, clearing the floor. The dining table was covered with a tablecloth, set with dishes, and a small wheeled table stood to one side, filled to bursting with those silver domed things room service always seemed to arrive in. The lights had been lowered, candles flickered on the table, and in candelabra set on the piano and the fireplace.

Nick was standing at the bottom of the stairs, dressed in a tuxedo, still wearing that 'I've got a secret' smile. A bouquet of roses rested across his arms.

why she'd turned away, she smiled sadly.

"For now," she whispered, "I'll settle for the dance."

Nick matched her sad smile, brushed the back of his hand across her lips, then raised the hand to his own lips. "For . . . now."

Even though the music had ended some time before, they began to dance in the darkness, holding one another tightly as the candles flickered around them. Natalie closed her eyes, relishing the moment. They might not have won the war, but this battle was a victory for them both. No matter how often they tried and failed to bring Nick back across, every attempt would bring them one step closer to the answer. And they'd have the strength to keep trying, now they knew there *was* an answer—because, after all, Dorian *never* lied.

At least . . . not to *her*.

the end